

Montserrat Soto, SIN DERECHO A RETORNO

Curator: Alicia Murría



The artist Montserrat Soto (b. 1961 in Barcelona) presents a new chapter of the major project she has been working on for more than twenty years and gradually setting out in extensive exhibitions. *SIN DERECHO A RETORNO* (**NO RIGHT OF RETURN**) is a substantial archive of photographs, videos, texts and documents that forms a frieze to guide us through the chaotic landscapes created by human beings. Her aim is to construct a narrative that will enable us to assimilate the environment we inhabit. Through contradictory and even antagonistic ideas, Soto shows us a range of realities from a present that is rooted in the past, in mythology, with gods and demigods from diverse religions and beliefs.

The title of the exhibition refers to Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which protects the right of return, stipulating that “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including [their] own, and to return to [their] country”. Today, these lines sound ironic, since this right that speaks of freedom has become a privilege unattainable for many. Her images capture environments in crisis, where the particularities of borders or boundaries come together, whether these be physical, social or ideological, visible (walls, fences, barbed wire) or invisible (laws, algorithms, debt); Soto captures ephemeral, transitory places that arise largely from humanity’s perpetual need for movement.

The exhibition begins with the section entitled *Fugitive from Fate. Hell Here and Now: Debt, Guilt and Control*. In the apse we find the door bearing the inscription *Facilis descensus Averno* (“Easy is the descent to Hell”), which marks the starting point of the show. The phrase is from Virgil in his *Aeneid*, where the hero Aeneas accepts that he is a “fugitive by fate”, since the fact that he is a fugitive, his exile, is the result of an inescapable destiny imposed by divine will. On the door, a symbol of Avernus (the entrance to the Underworld), we see the text reversed, to suggest the feeling of being confined inside a mirror. Next to this image we find desolate wastelands with signs directing us to various kinds of hell. In the second chapter, *Divine Crimes. From Veneration to Commodity: The Economic Evolution of the Gods*, we see images that allude to gods belonging to those diverse cultures and beliefs, as representations of the forces of nature – the sun, water, fire – which have nowadays been turned into economic resources. In Soto’s view, knowledge is freed from myth only to succumb to a new form of subjugation based on economic value, and she points out how the “fugitive by fate” becomes a “fugitive from fate”: the exile, the immigrant who sets out in search of a better future that they do not always achieve. An image in this section throws light on this reading: the one showing high stone crosses in a desolate spot alongside communication towers that also exercise control over our lives nowadays.

The third chapter, *Cities in Shadow. The Architecture of Collapse and the Duality of Freedom*, documents the over-exploitation of landscapes and resources by human beings. The artist points out how accumulated ecological liabilities – drought, deforestation, floods, pollution – precipitate a collapse of natural systems that drives migrants, fleeing from these extreme situations, towards “refuge cities”. As the writer Achille Mbembe remarks, this creates “[...] pockets of surplus populations, frontier bodies that inhabit the interstices of legality, in a shadow zone where law disappears”. The images captured by Montserrat Soto show us the structures of disorder: favelas, slums, *villa miseria* neighbourhoods, chaotic and increasingly tense spaces of survival.

We are also presented here with a video installation showing the poet and artist Dionisio Cañas, behind bars, walking and sketching some poems. His voice embodies that new “fugitive from fate”, and his words, which invade the space, become a guiding thread of the show.

The signage that Soto uses combines recognised codes referring to the landscape with complex codes (social, ideological and religious) that guide viewers and invite them to choose their own dialogue on our labyrinthine social articulation.