

BLUE LIGHT

I visited Esther's studio in London, way far out east on the south end of the river beyond the Thames Barrier, nestled in a mixed-use industrial estate that backed up onto the water. Our conversation began inside the studio. Esther walked me through some of her processes, the bioplastic and material samples she had on hand, as well as some sketches of the work she was considering for Museo CA2M. As the conversation flowed, she mentioned that there was an abandoned ship moored at the docks along the river. Her eyes lit up "something out of a horror film", she said. Relevant since horror as a genre had been a talking point up until then for the development of the exhibition, so we headed down to see it.

There it was, a huge weatherbeaten and windswept boat with torn sails flapping in the breeze, faded paint, a rusting deck with chunks missing, its hull set off-kilter, beached on the shore by the low tide. As we sat on the dock and gazed into the nautical marvel, the conversation shifted, as it generally does, from one directly related to the exhibition to one more personal. Esther was distraught, as she sheepishly recounted a personal anecdote about how she had recently fallen victim to an online scam and hackers had gotten access to her bank account. We discussed how she felt, the anxiety, vulnerability, loss of control and shame, themes that like horror were weaving themselves into the exhibition. Beyond the boat, the big skies and billowing clouds passed us by, as did the slow brown sludge of the old river, offset by views of luxury condos on the north side of the river, under construction and already built, indicative of the insidiousness of gentrification in London leaving nothing untouched. When we returned to the studio, consciously or not, the work began to take its current form, one that in hindsight beckons clear apparitions of the derelict vessel.

Esther and I first met in person in Madrid, for a site visit to the museum. The next day we went on a day trip to Valladolid, her home city. Famed for being the old capital of imperial Spain and the city where

Columbus died, its glory has long since faded. The city is now home to just shy of 300,000 inhabitants and the Castilla y León region is one of the least populated parts of Europe, *la Europa vaciada*. We made our way through the city's central park and then up onto the central shopping street, steering clear of a campaign bus for the fascist/Francoist nationalist political party Vox. We made our way through some of the churches and walked, like we did in London, along the river. We saw the attractions that one should see, interspersed with some that had a particular meaning for Esther. We talked about growing up in a place and knowing at a very young age that you needed to escape from it, about Catholicism and its long-term effects on family structures and on ways of thinking, about our relationship to guilt and how confession as a form is still liberatory despite neither of us being practicing Catholics. As if its tendencies entered by osmosis, Esther being Spanish and me from the US but with an Irish/Italian mix.

Toward the end of my time there she took me to La Alborada, a bar in the center of town positioned just in front of her high school, where she spent countless time as a teenager. It was vaguely nautical-themed, with a raised central platform, lit with multicolored lights and in particular a blue whose hue was similar to the lights found on the stairs of Museo CA2M. They were lights that one would find in a spa (another talking point for the show). We ordered juice and sparkling water and climbed up the three stair high platform, and sat on the white pleather furnishings, our conversation punctuated by images and sounds from the seemingly endless loop of Shawn Mendes music videos on display on the bar's comically large flatscreen. The bar was relatively empty aside from a few straight couples whose eyes were glued to the screen, seemingly transfixed, as was I, at the number of songs Shawn Mendes had in his repertoire. The bar contained a mix of materials and icons harkening back to, or rather still themed in, late 90's /early 2000's 'one world' aesthetic. Think Madonna's *Ray of Light*. I thought about what this bar might have felt

like in 2001 when Esther came after school, whereas now there was a palatable outdatedness and ‘tastelessness’, something that for me made it that much more interesting. I got the sense that explicitly referencing this type of architecture/aesthetic, or admitting that this was something that Esther ‘likes’, isn’t a common occurrence. There is a part of Esther’s work though that, to me at least, is clearly related to this kind of forced and fabricated ostentation. I see it with her Muji-inspired walls in the presentation at Generación 2022 and with the faux marble vinyls in her 2021 show *Ugly Enemies* in Cibrán.

In an ideal world as a curator I would make a visit to the artist’s hometown mandatory. This was my first experience and I found it to be incredibly revealing as we moved almost immediately beyond the standard calculated dialogue about an artist’s practice and into one that was inherently deeper, marked by direct experience, something outside of language. I was given a unique insight into a frame of reference, a material and conceptual database merging memory, teenage angst, boredom, fear, attraction, and repulsion. Maybe there is a part of these places that never leaves us, that haunts us, the memories of which are as cringe as they are definitive. I remember vividly the feeling of being a tween in South Florida and getting dropped off on sweltering summer days at the air conditioned mall for the day with my cousin, with little to no money. We would eat Auntie Anne’s pretzels, drop garbage from the second floor into the bins below, and shoplift. Lately I have been sitting with my ambivalence about these places, at once being critical of these sites as aspirational and tacky, as pinnacles of all the problems with late capitalist consumption, but also learning to accept that (at least in my case) they do soothe me and that there is something comforting about the fact that I can console myself in the anonymous buzz of the shopping mall.

The last time Esther and I were together before the exhibition install was in her studio for her residency at Wiels in Brussels. The work was already hung

from the ceiling and programmed, and at this point she could control it with her computer. She started it up for me and I was taken aback as it began to rumble and dance. I think it is a work that one really needs to spend time with, to see in person and feel the presence of, whereas despite the numerous videos and images she had sent I wasn’t ready for how powerful it was when I stood there next to it. It quite literally came to life; we were suddenly three: Esther, me, and *Emil*. We left it running as we spoke and the noise filled the pauses in conversation, like a television set humming in the background. It gave me a sense of calm like the drone of the mall and despite the ramshackle bucking and shaking, it was hypnotic. We discussed a few pending points about the treatment of the space, the lighting possibilities, whether or not the work was complete. Esther mentioned that she had recently stayed the night at her studio and slept beneath the sculpture. Ironically enough as we sat there talking on the very couch she had so recently slept on, there was a sudden crash. One of the cables that was suspending the work snapped and it plummeted, dropped to the floor and flipped to one side, like the shipwreck on the edge of the Thames. Previous to this rupture, the work had been hung in the studio for upwards of two months. It turned out that the cables broke because the wrong gauge of wire was used. It needed to be secured with something thicker as it was not only supporting the weight but also the extra strain put on the cables as it moved. It was miraculous that it fell when it did, not when Esther was sleeping beneath it, and when I was there to witness it and help put it back into position.

In *The Devil Within*, author Brian P. Levack discusses possession and exorcism in the Christian West, as the book’s subtitle states. He speaks of the prevalence of possession in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and how they could be thought of as a kind of collective theater in that the behavior of the demons related directly to the cultural context in which they found themselves. He explains the fundamental differences between the Catholic and Protestant

regions, in the ways that their people were possessed, their behavior and the intensity – the latter being more inward, relating explicitly to the Bible and the text, and the former being more material, more outward, bodily, and dramatic. The ideas from this book were formative in the original conversations about the show, and I think they still hold up to me as an apt frame of reference. In the literal sense that *Emil Lime* is possessed by an external force, it moves according to an external logic and power that is controlling it from above like a marionette in the theater that is the Museum. Also I think this idea holds true in relation to the bank account scam, the tide beaching the shipwreck, the slow degradation and eventual rupture of the cable that held up the work in Esther's studio:

they are all instances of reckoning with all-consuming forces that take over.

We spoke continuously about our shared fascination with regional fairs and rides. Attractions like the Pirate Ship and the Mechanical Bull made direct impressions on the work's final form. What Esther and I both love about these rides is the feeling of complete surrender, of submitting to a greater force, the liberation of losing oneself, the surge of adrenaline from being pushed to one's limit. There is a seduction in being held on this precipice, the moment just before getting thrown off the bull, suspended, like *Emil*, in movement.

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