

WEAVINGS, WRITING AND DUST

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The experience of drawing in Susana Solano's work is in itself a centre and a confine, a dark spirit and an open mind, a constant search for meaning and at the same time an extreme divagation into silence. This first review of 20 years of unpublished drawings by the sculptress on which I have been engaged for the last few months in preparing her exhibition at the MACBA, selecting from them, looking over them all several times in her studio in Gelida, has brought to light a radical juxtaposition that has always been a feature of her work, and has necessarily obliged me to take a position on that duality—clearly divided, not surprisingly, in the drawing—which could already be discerned in the basis of her sculptural thinking, and which I pointed to in my essay for the catalogue of her exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.¹ In that text I referred to the way the artist made use of remembering in order to arrive precisely at silence, and to the way she overturned the established laws of constructive sculpture to take a greater interest in a dialectical confrontation with the world, embracing its imperious fluidities and bringing to the fore such aspects as transience, absence and permeability, in order to make us participants in a tremulous anthropological reality. Now, in undertaking this in-depth review of her drawings, those aspects most closely related to what is sustained by the vital retreat of silence, such as restriction and active pausing, are without a doubt the most striking.

In fact, drawing is the medium that is closest to the straight, direct thought, the precise mental diagram in which an artist can manifest her or his most fundamental concerns and dilemmas in the most decided, least made-up, most interrogative form. In the way in which it is practised by this artist, it is hardly surprising that she herself should manifest her understanding of it by assigning to it a preferentially active role in capturing the very circulation of unrefined thought itself, rather than as a means of possessing the sought-for image: "rapid action of a

reflex, introspection of free thoughts that vanish immediately if I do not record them".²

Not a preamble to the sculptural imagery, then, but decided action and also, as we will see in due course, accommodation to the space as vital topography of the stimuli of the mind. In her drawing it is easy to perceive the simultaneous presence of two slightly different behaviours. On the one hand, she approaches it as a forced interiorizing in a plural reality of spaces referred to man. Explorations in geometries—in those which she likes to enjoy, almost physically grasping them—which encapsulate lives that are powerful, fragile, fleeting, magnetized, touched (much more in the drawing than in the sculpture) by a constant tendency to anthropomorphic suggestion or in confluence with natural elements. Very often, however, she devotes herself to another facet of drawing which is characterized by the undertaking of ascetic itineraries that involve her in long pauses in ignorance. Alternating behaviours which we might justify as the high degree of complementarity that would go from the drawing as project to the drawing as process, but which I prefer to interpret as the black and the white of writing, a duality equivalent to the alternation between memory and silence that I referred to at the outset, between the saying and the waiting, or even more, the going and the coming in an impassioned transmission that is marked off by a series of legitimate emptyings.

The artist has practised both of these forms of drawing since she started out in sculpture at the end of the seventies, and she has never abandoned them, perhaps because she has found in it this double quality that is very useful to her. The equating of the experience of capturing, conceiving and knowing with the inexperience of starting anew, of unsaying, of prefiguring. She is thus able, depending on periods and circumstances, on certain occasions to penetrate and make more reliable, by means of drawing, the multiple circumstances of reality (not only that which is visible but also the sensible) as the good and cautious scrutineer, possessing great psychological depth, of life that she is. The visual impacts adhere to a labyrinth of sensations in order ultimately to penetrate into inscrutable domains in which she is engaged in propping up provisional spatial architectures. The artist lets herself go with the kaleidoscope of intersections that derives from this, and comes back with images that are precise, synthetic and at the same time fluctuating in appearance, with indefinable meanings dancing around them. Concrete structural images, but

curiously not inanimate, whose energy breathes into them an abstract, faceted, mutable life, the fruit of the personal way the sculptress has of treating each presence in a kind of free, real and dynamic auto-experimentation and autogeneration. There is thus produced in the drawing a delirious investigation of the conceptual substance that underpins each image, an expansive investigation that is not entirely synchronized with that other sculptural reality that can be associated with it. At the same time, in other and no less lengthy processes, in contrast—as we will see below—the artist has engaged in a kind of drawing that is more exploratory and groping, like one who knows nothing, either of the self or of what is outside it.

Over the course of time, Susana Solano has worked and has understood drawing, therefore, as a conquest and also a disappearing, a passion and also an initiation, a voluptuous growth or simply a primordial punctuation. The two ways have always complemented one another, exhausting themselves one after the other, the one calming the other, or perhaps the one and the other mutually endowing each other with meaning. The first, then, is closest to a thinking of being [*estar*], of inhabiting possible spaces, of bringing back atmospheres, of remaking sensible experiences endowed with a framework. And the other would lie in a giving oneself up to being [*ser*]* pure and simple, to a total interpenetration with the spirit of the paper, dissolving itself in this way in a mere becoming.

There is a great and common aspiration of the non-existent towards existence. It is like a centrifugal force that grows out from all that moves around in me, images, dreams, projects, ghosts, desires, obsessions. That which does not exist, insists: Insists to exist. All that multitude of little things that make a little world push at the door of the big, the true world. And it is others that have the key.³

Extreme attitudes are brought together in this dilated practice of drawing, fruit of the great mental, perceptive, sensitive and also memorial activity of this artist. It is the most unprotected side of the process, that of a de-memoried communication with the great, absolute white emptiness, which—in short—proportions the most uninhibited, most electrifying syntax, that which is born out of the abrupt breaking of the rhythm of knowledge, that which overcomes the illusion of the images and loses itself in a natural flowing that is as diffuse as it is impregnating, as labyrinthine as it is decided, made of a great subterranean shud-

dering added to a striking sincerity. All of this drawing of the extreme oblivion before the great white well seems to answer to the most remote nocturnal character and thought. A nocturnal character as strong and as transparent as glass, as light as air and full of discharges as dangerous as fire.

In these strong episodes of drawing which we might describe as “primordial purposes”, which we have seen increase greatly over the course of the last five years and with which we will be especially concerned in this analysis, there is an imperceptible step that often causes them to leap from the ordinary to the extraordinary. They act as regenerators, as restorers of what is expended in perceiving, in remembering, in feeling with respect to something given, while seeking a kind of tuning in, of acclimatizing to the site of the paper, which would function as a space in which to adjust everything that makes possible not the form which is determined by an artist's syntax but the emitting force which carries it. In them we can retrace, with a surprising clarity, something similar to the prenatal substance of language.

This facet of the drawing, which we find at intervals and which has been very frequent over these 20 years of work, seeks to establish dialogue with the intact potentialities inherent in the notion of interiority. An interior without subject and without commentaries, coupled to the universe, irreducible, converted into the first experience of transit, into an incipient itinerary through the infinitesimal skin of the paper, by that powerful immensity with which the artist insinuated herself. Congregated in this intense experience are the very same aspects which Octavio Paz used to define the complete writer: “Sound and sign, inanimate line and magic, organism of clock-work and living being.”⁴

These extremely interesting intervals deserve a special attention over and above the varied iconographies or worlds suggested in the other series of drawings produced by Susana Solano, perhaps because—as has always been seen in her sculpture, and as she well demonstrates on paper—in spite of the strong physical presences, the artist has constantly inclined towards the contradictions of the constituted forms; or to put it another way, towards the volatilizing of the presence. As an organizer of spatialities which speak of man, she is a sculptress who is interested before all else in the force that comes from the aromas of places, from the fissures in communication, from human fragility, from changeable realities and from simple events.

Accordingly, to set oneself to creating itineraries of meaning on the paper, as she periodically does as a form of healthy exercise of dispossession; to seek to measure herself against that manifest void of the small or large white surface—and I am not referring here precisely to the symbolic confrontation with the creative emptiness of the intact plane which waits to receive and be covered with alien signs, but to the fact that this presents itself to her as a place that breathes in its own conditions, that waits for her to treat it as an echo of itself—; this other involves an ascetic acclimatization to the zero degrees of her own sculptural writing, a halting of the overloading of syntactic sedimentation in order to cause to bloom humbly the phenomenology of the void on the symbolic white sheet. This implies her submitting herself to the greatest possible frugality of means, that of holding in suspension all that has previously been learned, in order to allow the free flow in this minuscule world to surprise her and to leave great traces at the door of the big world, of that which is most visible and where apparently the codes already seem sufficiently clear and specific. This experience is probably for Susana Solano a not wanting to cease to be conscious that the dizziness of the descent, to come face to face with the elemental reasons of feeling oneself “be” often helps her to see it better.

This kind of deliberately referential penetration inside the rectangular surface of the paper involves detecting in the space itself—in order to convert them into living attributes—the degrees and the potentials of light, of thickness, of spreading, of depth, of slipperiness, of condensation, of turbulence, of calm, of closure, of distention, of tautness, of levity... They are all, in the long run, incorruptible manners of prefiguring the idea of territory, of considering change as the objectified form of the impulse, and the unsettling order as the basic principle of the formulation of life spaces.

The excitement of the void is the primordial factor in all of Susana Solano's thought. It exalts us in a disturbing communication with the most secret and impenetrable zones of the human being. In these latest drawings, a different kind of preconstructive void installs itself as an energetic retreat, after the spectacle of the forms, or between them. Almost like a parallelism with life itself, if we accept Antonio Porchia's maxim that “life is composed of various acts, but we find it in the *entr'actes*”.⁵

In the manner of mere symptoms of nascent organization, drawing of nets, of reticulations, of broken

geometries, of accumulated spirals, of dense turbid nebulosities, of indecipherable writing, of lost arrows, serve as a desert, as an incommensurable *entr'acte* which continually erases and causes to be unlearned every step taken on the linked surface of life. The remainder is events, but as Italo Calvino so acutely observes, “once included in a life, events arrange themselves in an order that is not chronological but responds to an internal architecture”.⁶

Events are strung together on a personal, private, ahistorical thread. In Susana Solano it is quite clear that it is in the stretches that separate them, the spaces of waiting, the zones of latency deposited in the drawing, that the event is grounded. Because in that stage which underlies dialogue with impermanence, with disintegration, with misplacings, with the nocturnal character of the vision, with flows and their dislocations, they are more evident, but also more portable and less transcendent. It is in this zone of retreat that her discourse relegates the constructive image to the simple primordial fact of weaving, of linking together, of signalling provisional life routes. From each of these we receive above all the confrontation with the unstable, with the transitory, which is to say with the sweet levitation, but also with the abrupt fall, with the tenuous brilliance and at the same time with the chiaroscuro force, with the measured rhythm and with chaos, with all won and all losing itself, with the sublime and with the most prosaic.

Having arrived at this point, her work—in which we have always seen the intersecting of confessional aspects with the ontological, the experiential and the communal, the private and the collective—disfigures and reorders everything from scratch in order to reveal to us metaphorically, with no story now possible, something that approaches the most intimate frequencies of the internal ups and downs of humanity. The artist finds a rare beauty in the fact of filtering herself through the most concealed layers of inner lives, and her intimate involvement with the most absolute nothingness gives her an exceptional freedom in the traversing of all times and all recoverings.

She recovers the past leaving it lost in the present, and re-experiences it within a new temporality that sets the experience on one side in order to rediscover the Benjaminian notion of the poverty and penury of time, involving herself with what is scarce in order to think new orders and new realities. The traversing of the time of expiry means the invoking of the time of repetition a time defined by silence, where no figuration is possible.⁷ Susana Solano's mis-

placed present can be perfectly well associated with a logic of the modern unconscious which puts together a constructed time (made up of fractures and changes in level), in order to work precisely within the very conflicts of the precarious itself, seeking to shake its limits.

All of this helps us to understand how the architectural framework comes to be incorporeal, immanent and phenomenological in the work of Susana Solano. If it is interesting to see in her sculpture the way that vacuity aspires to obtain physiognomies, the way that the vital spatiality is manifested by means of strong and at the same time vulnerable architectures of feeling, the paper enables her to inhabit the void directly, cleaving it iconoclastically, and to poeticize her encounters with it in making apparent the frictions and also the muteness, the interferences and her own perplexity, by means of traces full of sensations, of the very bustle of constructing, of playing at measuring, entering, losing oneself, inventing paths through the world, in the night, on the body, by way of beloved remotenesses, and embroil oneself in their flows, in their dizzinesses, in their attractive non-images.

Susana Solano engages with drawing like some one opening themselves to inexhaustible stimuli, new each time, but also ever older, more saturated with and thus more wounded by life, more enduring in the imprinting of murmurs, in contagious disorientations, in measured structurings, in risky frictions.

The deformations of the order

Right from her first drawings, an endless series of reticulations, of grids, of regular punctuations, of repetitive signs or of geometrical networks frequently figures. But in spite of their appearance, the interlaced rhythms that travel across the surfaces are not minimalistically regulated, nor are the surfaces crowded with impulses gestural. In these works there is always present a kind of natural behaviour that would have more to do with the functions of weaving, warping materials, recomposing out of the cutting-up, plaiting characteristic of the human hand that elaborates primary, precultural structures.

An aspect that makes it possible to understand perfectly a drawing of mere vertical punctuations in red ink on tracing paper from 1979, alongside a suggestive large-format drawing from 1998 constituted by the irregular coupling of small yellow triangles (il. 38). The former as an effective principle of territoriality inviting association with those first canvases cre-

ated by the artist where the regular sequential stitching of the edges (subsequently tensed by hand) was to lead her to obtain her earliest and softest interior spaces. The latter as an insistent figure of light that resembles an iridescent ocean, a land of golden fruits or a sacred mesh of sexes. The two drawings fluctuating within this oscillation that is so characteristic of the artist, of passing from tactile and intimate spaces to understanding the worked surface as an analogy of the great cosmic corporeality in which earth, water, the human body or the vault of the heavens are equally participants.

In the same way, for her, orthographic signs do not easily configure words. In any case, the subtle vibration of their organicism emerges before the veritable assumption of meaning. In 1992, unconnected letters appear on the paper in reiterative form, like a grey rain of signs, in the manner of inky bugs that traverse the sheets (ils. 21, 22). In similar fashion, in 1980, a series of dynamic curves detach themselves from ruled surfaces to take on autonomous life, like parentheses that can not find a word to protect and finally move around ethereally, liberated from the fact of being indebted to contents that are now non-existent (il. 1). And going even further back, in a 1980 series, nervous maps of fragile lines, capable of being associated with authentic graphics of life (il. 2), seemed to unravel themselves irremediably, to fall down in a kind of fleeting transit and leave traces marked on the edges, anticipating a similar process which the word "Africa" was to suffer in a series of drawings from 1993 (il. 20).

Before we enter into the multiple meanings which surround the series of drawings about Africa, let us recall a number of installations of a similar character in which regular measure and absence of control overlap in a surprising amalgam of precipitate haste and braking, of action and disorientation, speed and collapse, highly characteristic of certain works by Susana Solano, who herself explains the strong principle of disappearance that dominates her aesthetic in the sense that she herself noted of "looking for a being and always finding a fainting away".⁸

In the draft project for the open-air installation *Casiopea* (which in the end was not produced), conceived in 1991 for a site in California, there predominates among other aspects an involvement with the background, reducing all spatial experience to the same visual plane, made up of a rich journey of acceleration, stops and rebounds, which the artist was subsequently to associate with the movement, order,

form, intensities of light and proportions which determine the constellation Cassiopeia, from which the installation took its name. The artist explains this in the following words:

I appreciated the vegetation and the profound differences in level which configured the landscape. On both occasions I had the sensation of finding myself in a setting with a very intimate scale, although its physical proportions were gigantic. The structure of the trees is abrupt and their tops thick, even at the lower levels, and in my analysis of sensory observation they were retained as an inverse growth, from the top down. The slopes are always palpable, as if there were no difference between the vertical plane—gully—and the horizontal—ground, because it is a single plane, an abrupt slope which marks your advance. Walking in the lower zones I was overwhelmed by a sensation of being an animal which in its comings and goings had to wind its way around the trees, the slopes, without ever being able to run in a straight line. This animal aspect suddenly became associated with rabbit warrens; later, in the city I analyzed the way a ball moves by inertia when it is gently rolled down a slope, negotiating or bumping into the obstacles in its path, the changes of direction, the rebounds, the inclined plane; on both occasions, the zigzag was the line that stood out most.⁹

In the installation *Croissant la demi lune*, from 1992-1995 (il. 95), a number of irregular spherical bodies of different sizes end up in a kind of tumultuous journey, or we might say of impossible falls, on the great high ceilings of a university interior in Maastricht and subsequently in the Bonnefanten Museum, where the work was finally installed. On the other hand, the installation *Meditaciones no. 10*, from 1993 (il. 51), presents itself as a great level platform, with little movements of elevation (according to the artist, "like a carpet which, when you lift it, has its own weight"),¹⁰ which has underneath it, almost invisible, some large wooden balls that do not seem to take part in the other serene action of closure, but compose an aleatory situation in relation to the closed, like two actions and two lines of direction that contradict one another and unsettle us by their absurdity. Or perhaps, looking at it from another perspective very much present in the artist's work, a peculiar way of making the most inscrutable keys to the secret coexist with a kind of great staggering order.

In the series of drawings we referred to before, "Africa" is a tired word, its letters are situated within the space of the paper disconnectedly, collapsing, discordantly overlapping one another, detracting from

the name of origin, reversed as if in a mirror, slipping in a desolate straying errancy. In general, words and signs are resuscitated and at the same instant lost in the vastness of an inner world, which finds itself impelled towards a continual unsaying, as Paul Aster notes in one of his poems:

words
that barely have meaning. Until the end
I want to equal
what the eye
may, would
bring me, as if
finally
I could see myself
freed
in things
almost invisible.¹¹

Africa—according to Susana Solano—is "the friend",¹² given that it manifests itself to her as the great well of the resonance of the world's fragility, the great podium of weaknesses (made up of false strengths and impossible confluences) that undermine humanity. Perhaps it is for this reason that the map of Africa is so often embraced as a void reverberating inwardly, that will in time be converted into a patriarch's nostalgic mane, into a motionless stone in the middle of a rushing river, or will explore itself as an unreconstructable image in the form of a precarious fitting together of little fragments, or undergoing a subtle transmutation into floating skulls (il. 15). The fluctuations and the imperturbable, the wisdom of the world and its threats, uniqueness and disintegration, the infinite past and the dislocated present, all of these collisions stem from her long experience of Africa and we can analyze them in looking at these drawings.

For Susana Solano, travel, which over these last 10 years she has intensified to visit places difficult of access, where men and nature form part of a cohesive whole, such as Indonesia, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Mali or Algeria, is neither nostalgic, Utopian or revelatory. It is a time for seeking confirmation of certain ontological intuitions thoroughly understood and anticipated by the artist. For this reason, in the accounts she elaborates after her journeys, a permanent generic past is always intersecting and mixing around the sequence of her personal times. Remote civilizations do not provide her with the brilliant territory of revelation but give rise to the most stripped-away inward gaze, inward into herself as an extension of a disquieting penetration

into the human. The journey presents itself to Susana Solano as the site of the most radical confrontations with her own sensory make-up, and thus as a kind of disturbing probing into the shared experiencing of the project of the human being. A surrendering of herself to a kind of unprotected self-exposure, sensual and at the same time rebellious, from which it sharply catalyzes the frictions, the dialectics and the vagueness of the human condition.

So it is that, not only in the drawings which we spoke of before, but in all of the artist's work we find a kind of Dantesque passion for the mystic grandeur of the Divine Movement that bonds together men, animals, heavens and earth, visible in the fraternal relations between light and water, so often present in her work. But in the artist's vision there is no Paradise where the two elements become one nor, therefore, any form of hope in their symbolic fusion, nor any clear linkage in the ascending or descending system of relationships. The contemplation of the last lights or the last shadows is not directed towards the endless play of mirrors behind which the Godhead would hide. It is not even a contemplation but an involved, realist, convinced and committed transit through a opacity that is more peremptory, more everyday, more equal to herself, closer: that of the human being itself, trapped by the imbalance of all its long fortitude, coexisting with all its great disasters. The confrontation, face to face, with what she herself calls "the strength of weakness",¹³ with a kind of generous gulping down of life.

With her intimist and feminine gaze turned on the world, she speaks to us of a disturbed existence, made up of firmnesses and dissolutions, of an invalidity of the being found in the very magnetism of uncertainty. As if prolonging the simple fact of experiencing sensations such as the seduction of "bathing in a beautiful black curve of the river of shallow, stony water",¹⁴ the artist finds herself fascinated by the uncertain clarity of the subterranean currents of life. And she has developed a personal way of moving, guided by a—by no means strange—conjunction of wise femininity and subtle Orientalism, similar in their fundamentals in the way that both positions find precisely in the penumbra the explanation of the light.

Accumulations, distances. The deserts of the depth
Letters, signs, segments or words are, before all else, expressive orthography. Kinds of living organism that accomplish themselves on the paper, where they are

born and succumb, touched by a life that is instantaneous, primordial and mutating. Organic materials such as oil and ash have been incorporated there through the active vitality of their traces (ils. 19, 23, 24, 25). Even when these are events on the small scale, this leads us to interpret in a more precise way other works by the artist that function by emphasizing accumulative systems. Accumulation, in the sense in which Susana Solano does it, does not necessarily mean retention, but feeling precisely that everything escapes, understanding how elusive life is.

I refer to two recent works of great colourism: *Senggo*, from 1997, the central element of which is a column of photographs of sideboards from the Third World saturated with food products, and the dining table *Any d'art 97*, where, between the unequal horizontal platforms of wood and glass which compose the upper plane, she has created an intermediate mantle with invitation cards to a whole year of art events. In both of these pieces it is perhaps necessary to evaluate what we do not see. Behind the joy of accumulation for subsistence (whether of a primary or a sophisticated order, as these two works respectively communicate) there are uncomfortable underlying resonances resulting from the cultural disorders that every society carries inside itself. Accumulation not in the sense of a stratified, ordering and beneficent addition, but in the Babelist and convulsed sense of the term. Accumulation is thus practised by the artist rather as a "whirlwind of chance",¹⁵ understood in the Promethean sense of a small space of freedom in which man can place himself on a level with the universe. What we might describe as a provisional scenography of noise.

There is at the same time on Susana Solano's part a desire to refer to the double skin of things, clearly manifested in the drawings. A double skin understood as a changeable, replaceable life, not so much in the sense of making us aware of the masking, as is the case with some of the body aesthetics that have emerged in the nineties, but rather in the sense of de-concealment and transference towards the interior. The desire to pass through the turbulences that are implicit there, to recover the density of things, conscious that in the end we will find nothing there other than what she calls "the dust of time".¹⁶ Susana Solano is interested in bringing out the tensions of the double epidermis as another way of filtering herself through the shadows of things. Engaging in dialogue with the shadow zones is evidently, for her, an unleashing of firm appreciations, albeit within the

conviction that there is nothing consistent and that the pure trajectory is, in the last analysis, the only fact that has any meaning.

1993 was a particularly intense year for her researches in the field of drawing and small-format works, in much the same way that 1987 was so extremely fruitful in large sculptural ventures. Prior to summer 1993 Susana Solano created small transparent volumes, within the series *Fragments* (conical, cuboid, concave, like little turgid cushions, using very flimsy, almost incorporeal iron mesh covered with little blue ceramic tesserae, or containing these loose, as part of a general concern with giving substance to transparency (ils 76, 77). The idea of fragmentation came to her as a consequence of her then recent involvement with candles. In the drawings, the candle appears as a linear element, minimal, fragmentary, represented rectilinear newspaper cut-outs that are repeated to configure an organized whole. In the sculpture, her most exultant work with light was the ephemeral installation *Meditaciones no. 9* (il. 89), produced in her studio in 1993, with 704 fairy lights constituting an enclosure that became a moving itinerary along genuine rivers of light.

More than the idea of the container, with which we were familiar from earlier small-format works, by means of this vivid piece with its little transparent geometries she put forward the general image of the cover, of the vaporous covering, of an encasing that is without confines and at the same time transparent. This is important because the artist was there opening up to a new notion of softness, now more clearly associated—as we will see below—with our own human nature. Works imbued with a kind of subtle protection, hence the reference, as pointed out by the artist herself: in creating this series she had in mind a “muff for warming one’s hands”.¹⁷ For covering one’s hands and for receiving what the body touches, the things on one’s desk, a little food, or dreaming itself. And yet in this series she is also alluding to the uncontainable centre, to the eternal impossible enclosure, in creating an endless open spiral, solidity and its own ruin, within this constant struggle inside the artist to make reference to covering and at the same time to its defeat, to shelter and its overthrow, to the most intimate warmth and the most absolute coldness.

In 1995 she was invading the paper with collages of torn-up scraps of natural-coloured paper, or with repeated blue waves of a blind writing, with its rhythms and non-rhythms, with its high point of vital-

ism and its pauses for breath. Comings and goings through tension, through sweetness, through dis-synchrony. Present at all times is the idea of dismembering to remake or, what comes to the same thing, of constructing on the basis of the simplest unit, of according value to smallness, to the little living pattern. This quality is also found in the great sequences of rings linked together to form a cellular fabric, or in the large and enigmatic surfaces of sinuous horizontal and vertical intersectings (the reticular system basic to all volumetry) (il. 32), or in the more recent saturations of ramifications and extensive scatterings which spread across the paper (ils. 29, 30, 31, 35). Just as in her sculptures the sheets of iron configure a far from compact whole, an always provisional scenario of life, these new drawings reticulate and probe the vital interior mass of the paper with the same sense of the fleeting.

This new assumption of another space which the artist has gone about consolidating in particular in the large drawings of the last few years is thus an atomized, nuclear, expansive space which is situated on the fine dividing line that runs from the crisis to the genesis. A healthy, hopeful space, made up of ruin, of dissolution, of dwindling, which aspires in short to being a space of great potentialities in which everything seems to start out anew.

In this spirit the artist has intervened on more than one occasion on large sheets of paper with enormous and autonomous or small and agglomerated spiralling signs. Demarcating signs, elaborated with attractive black collages or with sinuous brown inks made from indigo leaves. We should recall here the curling lines that encircle and even constrict the artist’s legs in the series of photos *Acerca del cuerpo*, from 1995 (il. 80), consisting of spiral wires twisted around her body. And we should also recall the bands of black rubber running around the perimeter of the compact ovals of pale wood in the series *Resultado de un intento*, again from 1995, in an elegant game of coverings which subsequently, in the work entitled *Closca no. 3*, from 1996 (il. 78, 79), ended up as a mere tangle of lines, like a great nest or a great flattened head.

In these experiences a fundamental role is played by the dynamic idea of marking the body and then liberating it from its covering, converting this into ornament, into the imprint of a reversible action, which makes the body something active to free itself of it. In consequence, we might think there is a whole disturbing desire to tattoo, we might almost say to

demarcate in an animal, territorial manner, the body of the paper. In a number of 1997 sessions, this territorial palpation, understood as an initiation, was carried out, in a yet further step, on sheets of tracing paper placed like a great shroud between the artist's naked body and her hand which, on the outside, with cold acrylic paints and by feel alone, tried to follow the uncertain paths and corners of the corporeal landscape (ils. 16, 26, 27, 28). The body of the paper and her own body or those of other beings are merged here in a reciprocal action of mutual discovery.

Tattooing in the sense not of decorating but as a symptom of movement, as a displacement, as a making way, as a travelling in what we do not recognize, signalling it, in a continual and risky rediscovery. And at times taking the sense of risk, of surprise, to the attempt at a topographical game. From this angle, then, she has created collages in the form of stepping stones, like some one who measures out a space in skips and jumps (in the manner of certain children's games) (il. 17), she has made large drawings of arrows like icebergs floating adrift (like a kind of game without any possible rules) (il. 33), and has conceived a series of small drawings for playing with, the object being to link the most distant points on the paper by means of simple lines of ink (following the principle of noughts and crosses).

This act of linking together distant points—but here of a different order; cultural distances—was the basis for an interesting published work, *Caminos cruzados* (il. 96), produced in the Swedish city of Göteborg in May 1998. This consisted in placing by the side of five local churches photographs taken by the artist of analogous social functions in the indigenous Dani community of Irian Jaya in Indonesia, a region with a great number of Western churches which no longer have any function. In this action of exchange of cultural signs, the photographs at the same time bear witness to the physical nakedness of the population, carried with as much pride as the most solemn dress.

But in the act of uniting, interlinking, bringing together, Susana Solano makes us aware that the distances have not been erased, that they are even at times more patent, and she leaves us more perplexed, as she does with the unsettling synthetic sculpture *El lugar de donde volví*, from 1998 (il. 53), in which, tautening the borders of a square perimeter with clearly traced internal diagonals (equivalent to the lines which compose the "noughts-and-crosses" drawings), all that is achieved is the insinuation of the elevation of an inte-

rior space made for solitude and not for encounter. Travelling the distance, then, serves to underline the very condition of distance itself and to recognize the hermeticism inherent in the fact of failing to encounter.

In the same way, in the installation *Fricciones*, produced in 1995 in a Valencia gallery, the large iron pellets set down irregularly at the four extremes of the great plastic sheet covering a suggestive interior space between two floors (a value which the artist manifested in the form of a slightly sloping shallow basin) served not to stabilize the surface but to direct us, by means of its centrifugal force, towards the disturbing translucid light of this improvised interior. On one occasion, referring to an image from her childhood, of swinging above an irrigation tank, the artist recalled a similar magnetic density proceeding from the lower plane: "sitting now on the wood of the swing and gripping the ropes very tight, I looked at the immense plane of water at my feet. I would say it was almost like oil, almost gold, from the colour of the sun reflected in it."¹³

The attraction to centrifugal force is also the primary subject of many of the artist's circular drawings, in which she devotes her attention to a variety of themes, such as a large water tank contained inside a building in Barcelona, the closed-in forms of cultivation on Lanzarote, dug down below ground level as a protection against wind erosion, a Viking tomb she visited in the south of Sweden composed of standing stones positioned in such a way as to draw an elementary form of boat, pointed towards the sea. Each of these three circular images could easily be something else. All of them, being of considerable size, transport us to minuscule worlds, consecutively a whirlpool created with a little stick, rounded clasped hands or stones on a tray, very much in tune with the de-hierarchized notion of dimension with which the artist plays continually. The artist would agree that the things of the world have the measure of man, have the measurements of what is tangible, of what can fit in the hand. Accordingly, in many drawings and sculptures she sets us down before the disjunctive situation of being able to grasp large spatial scenarios from the outside, only to go on to experience them as the most vulnerable zone of our intimate privacy.

In contrast, in other drawings we frequently find the symbols of the twisting crossroads, in what is for her an everyday experience in the Urgell region (ils. 12, 13), and the organic cross, which can be related to her explorations of the Coptic churches of Lalibela,

dug out of the earth, in the rock of the subsoil itself (ils. 41, 43, 47). The two symbols are often transformed into a schematic human silhouette which seems to want to grasp the paper with its open extremities. The crossroads, the cross and man are never other than centres in expansion towards all of the cardinal points. The same sense of expansion and multidirectionality to which we referred earlier continues to be at the basis of these naturalistic drawings.

But the energetic force that attracts her most is perhaps that of travelling inward, that for which we find an image in the endless spiral. Walking, flowing and also groping in the most surprising darkness. This passage in to the furthest recesses has, in Susana Solano, very specific and revealing connotations, which are brought out in this short text about going into a cave on Menorca:

In the interior an enormous space of proportions similar to a church and at the back another but smaller cave which recalls the mouth of a theatre. In the faint light of the interior "from time to time a drop of water fell from the roof and was caught in a stone in the form of a basin". We refreshed our faces in it, the water was creamy.

[...] I move closer, I can't imagine its interior, little by little are revealed its void and its entrails, beneath the surface of the earth.¹⁹

And in this other suggested image we find ourselves contemplating something similar:

Dead, the darkness surrounds me.
I deposit in its depths, beneath the waves, my memory.²⁰

The seductive attraction of the most buried depths understood as pit of life, as protective cave, possibly by distant association with the curve of the maternal body, which would be the first fragility of life with which the human being is confronted, is also a referential image that points towards a macrocosm made up of a double coupling of depths, linked by an absolutely crossable threshold. That of the dividing line between heaven and earth, between the most blinding light and the most inscrutable darkness, between ethereal suspension and excavation. An open and fluid threshold (as a symbol of hospitality in use in many primitive societies) between the celestial vault of night and prominent and protective interior terraqueous cavities. In consequence, despite the naturalistic elements very often associated with the work of Susana Solano, she is not landscapist in her vision but cosmic in spirit. Perhaps for this reason one of

the images which the artist finds most suggestive is that of "floating in concavity",²¹ probably a poetic way of uniting the two worlds and of paraphrasing, in terms that are simple but at the same time macrocosmic, the idea of being suspended in the great mystery of life. Of feeling human consciousness as confined in that which is most inaccessible to it.

In a 1993 drawing the water seems to overflow from a whirlpool, the spiral creates a double of itself, like a narcissistic reflection in white of the image in black above it, interconnected and abysmally twined. And in yet another, the dimensions of the paper are augmented to create a collage with the continuous silhouette of the spiral cut out of white paper (like the elemental peel of a fruit removed from its body), conserving in its interior a memory of water in allowing a small circle drawn in blue inks to be glimpsed in the mobility of the background. Finally, in 1997 she drew a large black labyrinth invaded by external interferences (like a cloudy televisual curtain of water), in this way transferring the naturalistic idea of water to the technological. But the labyrinth is also a prehistoric image. On the symmetrical stairways of the great Liechtenstein Palace in Vienna the artist created in 1996 the small piece *Amón* (il. 93), on one of them framing a fossil naturally encrusted in the red marble of one of the steps, and on the symmetrically opposite step (in the other wing of the building) placing a real fossil, an ammonite of the same size. The image of the spiral has been a constant in her work on paper, either as an abysmal engulfing hole or in association with the image of a large snail. The same iconography serves to represent both the protecting shell and nothingness, the womb and dispersal, the warmth of enclosure and the most insupportable opening.

In that most recent and complex drawing to which we referred, she seems to want to give form to the erratic friction of slipping inside, by means of two layers of spaces through which circulate polarized energies. From all of these incursions she derived the sculpture: *Círculo: Casus belli II*, from 1997 (il. 49), a flat mesh of iron carpeting the ground in a spiral which terminates in a destabilizing central window. In the centre, nothing, the most terrifying transparency. To go in, to seek to know, to disappear in the end. As she herself has written in a short text:

Somewhere to go in the brutality or the placidity of the free spirit.
While a whisper says to me, stop now, there is nothing.²²

The eternal desire to absent oneself often comes back after throwing oneself into the great love and the great discomfort of an intense passage through life. Within the Leopardian epic, which is very close to that of Susana Solano, faced with the chaotic world in which we find ourselves immersed, it is impossible to avoid unhappiness. Death as a return to nothingness, but also life, in the sense of living to desire, and desiring in order to be able to feel the pain more keenly. To extract, in the end, from "despair" and "pain" a "barbarous joy".²³

The porous house

This gravitating around the secrets of existence has made the artist conscious, above all in the last decade, that external spaces and internal spaces are one and the same. Or, to put it another way, that outside of the body there is no possible cover, something which has led her to affirm on one occasion that "the house is the body". In one of her lectures, the artist has spoken of the house as a "coat for the floods and the storms",²⁴ but it will be difficult to distinguish the habitat from the body if we understand it as an abode made up of adherences and impermanences, if we understand it as a "space of flight" and of evacuation, as that of the body is. The house would then be a store of crossing lives, quite clearly, which encapsulates the fragile and provisional course of our lives and is in this way, according to the artist, a demonstration that the actual coat, the refuge or the cave do not exist in a perfect form.

By means of the photographic series, which have been becoming more and more present in her work, she has managed to establish a close dialogue with the body, both human and animal. In the series *Hidroteràpia*, from 1991-1992, or in the 1993 series *Sense* (il. 85), both of which feature views of the bodies of old people deformed by the water in spa swimming pools, the artist set out to recapture the powerful reciprocities between man-water-light—as we have seen, three elements that she sees as primordial—in order to extract from that process, however, an image of the bodies as remains of themselves. The actions of these natural agents altered them, in the same way as we find in the series *Memòria*, from 1992-1993 (il. 86), in which she interleaves images of her mother's head with the sculpted heads of classical Roman statuary. Here time as the agent of unstoppable transformations attacks both the individual and the historical past in an implacable and disfiguring equation.

The head and the torso, perhaps because they are in effect two clearly defined volumes, have separately occupied an important place in the artist's work. Curiously, among the Asmat people of the south of Irian Jaya, when a man dies his head is allowed to become separated from his body, and the two are treated in different ways: the body is buried, but the head is preserved.

As early as 1981 the artist was describing the blocks of wood she smoothed down as capitals. This was the human resonance of her first cubic mass. And very soon after, the first container-spaces from 1982 resembled human torsos with synthetic lines. Something similar is happening now, in that while the figures at the spa we remarked on above appear without heads, because is directed onto the phantasmagorical undulations of the body, in 1993 the artist produced a number of works composed entirely of wax heads (*ex votos*), like crowds of identity-less people confined in transparent plastic.

At present she is working on wire-mesh sculptures in the form of boats (although they might also evoke human torsos), the whole surface of which is patiently studded with little plastic rings (*Rumores*, 1998 (il. 60)). It is not the image as fragment of the body that we take in at first, however, in these light, emotive pieces, but certain bodily qualities transferred onto them. Qualities of flaccidity, of softness, of fleshiness, that seem to impregnate much of the artist's recent work. The denoting of the body as "dwelling" of the first order has meant that in her work since 1993 there is a certain move away from the architectural spaces which emphasize the notion of human absence in favour of more direct allusions to the corporeally organic.

If, to narrow the circle, the artist's own body now manifests itself to her as the culminating metaphor of anthropological desolation, it is the sculpture that bears the consequences; or, to put it another way, it readapts her skin and her weight. A greater weightlessness, a greater fragility and a greater elasticity appear in her latest work, formed in many cases from softer meshes, which first emerged in the form of footprints on the earth (*Círculos: Casus belli I*, from 1996) and have since been transformed into analogies of human masses abandoned to their fate (*La balsa de la Medusa I*, from 1997) or enigmatic fleshy unfoldings bearing the name of an African tree (*Kapokier*, from 1997 (il. 63)).

A new trembling of life installs itself in these sculptural pieces, probably due at the same time to

the new records of the human body provided her by her increasingly frequent use of photography Susana Solano engages with photography on the basis of series which she does not deliberately plan in advance; series which come into being without a script or any clear purpose. With what she captures in photographs she recovers aspects of the life that goes on all around her and from which she receives unexpected revelations. She does this reservedly, anxiously, and from very simple viewpoints powerfully addresses the most intriguing corners of life. In addition to deformation and degradation as inevitable forms of the dissolution of bodies, as we saw above, in other series the artist makes reference to the savage beneath the surface of man (*Homo homini lupus* no. 1 and no. 2, from 1993-1994), to passive aggressiveness (*Muecas*, from 1997 [il. 88]) and to the caricaturing of culture, involving herself, wearing a disguise, in an anonymous performance on the subject of the circus of art (*De oca a oca y tiro porque me toca*, from 1997 [il. 83]). Or else she follows with her camera the visual itineraries of a member of her family whose memory has been lost, but who can recover it in the gestural language of hands and eyes when the body is not controlled by the mind (*Residencia*, from 1996-1997 [il. 87]).

Everything would remain inside us in the manner of a murmur, in the manner of an echo, in the manner of breath. the memory of time, of consciousness, of biography, would become an apersonal, transferable memory without weight. Its lack, then, would be not a loss but a strength, an emptying of ourselves to go back to our own beginnings, an unburdening of baggage in order to affirm the essential. Perhaps for this reason one of her latest projects (conceived in 1996) is a kind of "sensible" homage to abandonment, with the purpose of making us in turn active subjects of the homage. *New York* is a circular space five metres in diameter, unusually habitable, filled with steam which mists the four little mirrors on the wall, covered with narrow strawberry-coloured grids. The immaterial dominates the scene. Our image can have no possible reflection unless we make our way through the humid atmosphere, towards it. But we have to decide if it is worth doing this, or if we prefer to leave the resonance of our double wrapped in the misty clouds of the aqueous coloured shadows.