

ECHOES AND EXCAVATIONS: NARELLE JUBELIN'S 'NALGURES' (SOMEPLACE)

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Artists living in exile, like the Madrid-based Australian Narelle Jubelin, risk slipping out of focus despite all the talk of a global art world, particularly if their work addresses foreign localities and engages non-anglophone audiences.

Jubelin's recent exhibition, 'Nalgures' (Someplace), occupied two levels at the centre of one of the grand contemporary art museums that sprang up in Europe in the last half-century as part of a new international circuit. The dazzling light-filled Galician Centre of Contemporary Art (CGAC) was designed by the eminent Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza Vieira (between 1988 and 1993), and is located in the most sensitive monumental area of Santiago de Compostela, a city renowned for Christian pilgrimage, in north-west Spain. So how does Jubelin as a foreigner negotiate such a loaded site?

Her response to the invitation from the CGAC was to excavate aspects of ancient and recent Galician culture. Jubelin's signature petit points vividly render in stitch these local histories, which in the exhibition were intricately woven into a larger narrative encompassing themes of public housing, domestic life, labour and architecture through a combination of film and found objects. Both the floor and glazed wall of the entrance hall were animated, the latter with a white handwritten text of quotes mostly in Galician – poetic fragments by journalist and writer Ana Romání.

Working in partnership with curator Natalia Poncela López and designer Marcos Corrales Lantero, Jubelin played with the light and volume of the museum's austere architecture that connects it with the Galician tradition of granite stonemasonry. For instance, the dazzling white entrance hall was articulated by five bright yellow benches set at various heights along the wall, each displaying a spare group of objects. The first grouping had two whimsical petit-point renditions of *hórreos*, Iberian stone granaries, that still dot the Galic-

ian countryside. The catalogue annotations cite Bernard Rudofsky, who observed of them in his classic 1964 Museum of Modern Art catalogue *Architecture Without Architects*: 'Put together from large granite slabs, a horreo is fire- and vermin-proof ... Folklore has it that horreos go on walks at night.'¹

The Galician laundry is the other stone architectural form that Jubelin has rendered. Her exquisite stitching in cotton thread on silk or linen weft reveals three of these now-abandoned open-air structures sited on the Atlantic coast where women worked together at great granite troughs before the era of whitegoods. These communal places have been memorialised as miniature monuments to women's labour in a remarkably nuanced and subtle way. The accompanying text quoted an elder woman, Encarna Otera, who recalled how 'laundresses filled Compostela with life and work ... the good work of women which must be appreciated and recovered ... always badly paid and which led to illness, pain, cold and getting wet, but which also involved songs, laughter, fun and celebration.'²

Jubelin's work has incorporated two more recent Galician cultural strands: that of the Catalan photographer Anna Turbau who in the 1970s documented workers' lives and their resistance to the incursions made into their rural landscape by tourism and motorways; and that of the Sargadelos ceramics group ('a great industrial and cultural project of Galicia' according to historian Agar Ledo), which collaborated with both foreign and local artists to design and produce innovative domestic wares for some four decades from the late 1960s. Groups of these fine ceramic vessels were placed along the shelves, several in a shape 'similar to the popular St Andrew's dove modelled with breadcrumbs, always found in the pilgrimage "bouquets" and often appearing in the image of the Saint'.³ Six of Turbau's profoundly moving black-and-white prints punctuated the 'Nalgures' installation.

Narelle Jubelin: Nalgures, exhibition installation view, Galician Centre of Contemporary Art (CGAC), Santiago de Compostela, 2022; courtesy CGAC, Santiago de Compostela; photo: Manu Suárez





Into these specifically Galician themes, the artist inserted shelves of petit-point renditions from several of her related projects. For instance, included were six monochrome interpretations of Eileen Gray's *Satellite Mirror* (1927) from Jubelin's 'Shumakom' series of 2001-02 shown at the Jerusalem Artists House during the Second Intifada. Facing it on the ground was a vast construction made from units of cardboard packaging overlaid by stone-coloured knitted panels. In a characteristic Jubelin leap, Gray's *Satellite Mirror* was linked to *Floor (Gaza Strip, 2014)* (2022) by an accompanying annotation which revealed that it was modelled on satellite imagery documenting Israel's 2014 offensive,⁴ with its colourless contour of housing blocks and depressions mapping the carpet bombing of Gaza.

One starkly abstract petit point, *As yet untitled (Keith Coventry, 1995)* (2022), pulled another locality into the 'Nalgures' series. What looks like a tiny constructivist image of fine yellow verticals and horizontals on pale grey is, in fact, a homage to a series of the British artist Keith Coventry, whose paintings trace the footprint of United Kingdom social housing estates.

Upstairs saw the large-scale projection of three recent videos across three spacious rooms. The first film, also titled *Nalgures* (2022), traces the granite outline of four laundry sites in slow moving pans. Shot by the artist in black-and-white, the massive structures set

in the liminal space of Spain's northern Atlantic coast have the grandeur of ancient ruins, haunted by the memory of women's labour. An earlier video by the artist, *The Third Space* (2012-13) documents an unlikely Tasmanian encounter between modernism and the Hobart CBD branch of the Country Women's Association. It commemorates the women's 2012 tree-planting project at the site of another 'ruin', that of Australia's first modernist church designed by architect Esmond Dorney in the Hobart suburb of Tarooma. One local ritual of country women faced the absent trace of the others, as if in a ghostly dialogue between ancient and modern cultures. In between was *The Housing Question* (2019), a 29-minute video collaboration with Helen Grace, which has at its core the work of two modernist architects, Harry Seidler and his Spanish counterpart José Antonio Corrales. This hybrid avant-garde documentary that shifts between Australia and Spain incorporates footage of pre- and postwar social-housing schemes alongside the architects' classic houses. It ends with a mad flamenco dance performed in the confines of a tiny modern Barcelona social-housing kitchen, the first to go onto the real estate market.

In the final aisle upstairs, five related works echoed and expanded on the architecture of Corrales and Gray. As for all her projects, Jubelin has written detailed annotations that provide clues and links between the

Top:
Narelle Jubelin: *Nalgures*, exhibition detail view, Galician Centre of Contemporary Art (CGAC), Santiago de Compostela, 2022; courtesy CGAC, Santiago de Compostela; photo: Manu Suárez

Bottom:
Helen Grace and Narelle Jubelin, *The Housing Question*, 2019, installation view, 'Nalgures', CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, 2022; HD video: colour, sound, 29mins 12secs duration; courtesy CGAC, Santiago de Compostela; photo: Manu Suárez



Top:

Narelle Jubelin, *As yet untitled (José Guerrero, 1966)*, 2014, installation view, 'Nalgures', CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, 2022; from the 'Flamenca primitiva' series, 2014, and the 'Nalgures' series, 2019–22, interpretation in petit point, cotton thread on silk weft, 31 x 33cm (framed); courtesy CGAC, Santiago de Compostela; photo: Manu Suárez

Bottom:

Narelle Jubelin, *As yet untitled (Pinisqueira laundry site II)*, 2022, installation view, 'Nalgures', CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, 2022; from the 'Nalgures' series, 2019–22, interpretation in petit point, cotton thread on linen weft, artist's frame, glass and eucalyptus wood, 29 x 52 x 2.5cm (framed); courtesy CGAC, Santiago de Compostela; photo: Manu Suárez



48 distinct components of 'Nalgures'. Women's labour and her own intensely wrought work are the political threads that ran between these diverse spaces and places. Yet for the viewer, these narratives were never overt or rhetorical, as the relationships between the different realities could only be intuited. All these parts built a rich and complex dialogue that mirrored that described by Álvaro Siza Vieira, quoted in one of the annotations:

The first problems, related to the selection of a single typology for all, manifested themselves during the discussion with the neighbours, and then became a political issue ... This mistrust of monotony is a real challenge to the search for difference, which cannot be resolved merely as a matter of aesthetics ... The discussion was highly contentious, as it should be in a participatory process, and yet it never compromised the dialogue.⁵

'Nalgures' was a remarkable survey of Narelle Jubelin's work over the last two decades since she moved to Spain, and one deserving to be more widely seen.

1. See www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_3459_300062280.pdf, accessed 5 November 2022.
2. See cgac.xunta.gal/sites/default/files/docs/exposicions/2022-06/Folleto%20Narelle%20Jubelin%20ENG.pdf, accessed 5 November 2022.
3. Quoted by Isaac Díaz Pardo in *ibid.*, n.p.
4. See annotation in *ibid.*, n.p.
5. *ibid.*, n.p.

Curated by Natalia Poncela López, 'Narelle Jubelin: Nalgures' was exhibited at the Galician Centre of Contemporary Art, Santiago de Compostela, from 3 June until 16 October 2022.