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El Ingenio Revolucionario

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Alejandro Garmendia, *El Ingenio Revolucionario*, 1994-1998, varnish, resin and photo emulsion on canvas, 244 x 361 cm (92 x 142 inches)

Alejandro Garmendia (1960-2017) was a Spanish-Basque painter known for his unusual and inventive use of collage, drawing, photography and printmaking. He was also my uncle. In March 2018, a year after his death, Garmendia was honored with the retrospective, *Alejandro Garmendia: Paisajes, enigma y melancolía* at the Sala Kubo Museum in San Sebastian, Spain. An attempt to reassess his life's work.

Garmendia was part of the cultural scene of post-authoritarian Spain which saw the integration of freedom of expression and other democratic norms new to post-Franco Spanish society.

He was the son of a chemist and an early exiled member of ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna). His family moved to Paris shortly after he was born. During his childhood moving

was constant, and undermined any form of belonging or concept of home. This would resonate with the subject matter and psychological character of his work throughout his life. His work from the late 80s and early 90s, paintings on wood with layers of photocopies, tracing paper, and polyester resin convey a pictorial blurriness with surfaces that look like frozen windows. The atmospheric quality of these works and the palpable sense of distance are aspects that would reoccur throughout the melancholic nostalgia that becomes perceptible in these paintings. These read as representations of the artist's nomadic and disorienting childhood. Juan Manuel Bonet, former director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and the IVAM in Valencia, wrote an insightful essay where he concludes that Garmendia is a, "cazador de su propia infancia" (hunter of his own childhood) (Bonet, *Un paseante*: p.5).



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Moving Back to the Basque Country after 12 years in Paris, Alejandro was exposed to a grey and sinister heaviness which was prevalent in the border region during the 70s. The combination of the mountainous region's gloomy weather, and relentless political persecution of Basque refugees spilling over the French border from Franco's Spain made a lasting impression on him. This did not persuade him to become politically active — like many others of his generation — on the contrary, his interest is situated in an aesthetic character that is a moody dark record of these times.

Garmendia is commonly called Sander by friends and family. He spent his formative years living in Bilbao in the 70s and 80s; where he studied Fine Art at the Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU). Bilbao became a hotbed for countercultural tendencies spreading throughout Spain. From an early age, he had a passion for inventing characters and humorously reimagining everyday life. This impulse motivated his genuine interest and meticulous observation of the marginal characters and anti-heroes who populated the taverns and bars at the time in Bilbao (Millicua, *On Fifo: cómic y humor de Alejandro Garmendia*: p. 50).

His sense of humor was unique. In his every day interactions with people and his comic strips, he expressed a propensity towards the exaggerated, the grotesque. He created nicknames for people and, subsequently, entertained fictional life situations that would accompany those nicknames. These alter egos of close friends and strangers alike, were reoccurring and persistent. They populated his world of solitude in his small town on the French Basque border. He was a master at imitating accents; capable of recording a variety of intonations and distinct personas in French, Spanish, and to a lesser extent in English. Impersonation and disguise were a great source of entertainment. This was an effective way of creating irrational parallel universes that gave everyday life a more colorful texture. After all, he was a surrealist in the tradition of Luis Buñuel. By means of repetition, these parallel universes would gradually turn into accessible routines, activated through gestures or a certain gaze. For Alejandro, the imagination and its absurd potential was the most attractive way of embellishing the mundane aspects of ordinary life.

Fifo López was Alejandro Garmendia's most notable alter ego, a salsa music aficionado born out of a group of friends who frequently organized Latin American music — salsa, vallenato, cumbia — dance parties in Bilbao. The continued exposure of this alter ego culminated in the creation of the musical group, Fat Esteban (Fat Stevens) (1991-1997): a band founded by Garmendia — who played

guitar and sang under the pseudonym Fifo López; Mauro Entrialgo — a comic cartoonist, guitarist; and later the bolero singer Juanjo Pedregosa. They released two EPs, *Desde el seminario* (1991) and *Galaxian* (1994). Absurd humor was a trademark of this *band*: in the album cover of their second EP, the two guitarists are dressed in space attire while the lead singer wears a clumsy ill-fitting tan suit — giving him the appearance of a unextraordinary 1950s nightclub performer. This blend of progressive rock, crude recordings, and traditional sentimental Spanish vocals characteristic of the bolero genre, was an unconventional and innovative combination. A bizarre constellation of sounds lacking melodic fluidity which, nonetheless, had an avant garde ring to it. They ironically gave themselves the slogan, “los magos del ritmo” (the wizards of rhythm). A tongue and cheek gesture, considering they were aware of how ridiculous they were. They dressed up for the majority of their live performances and described the genre of their music as dada rock. Some sources of inspiration were Frank Zappa — the latter's humor and untamed nature were greatly admired; Brian Eno — the godfather of ambient music, a hero for Garmendia; and Robert Fripp — whose experimental guitar work resonated with the group. After the band split up, Garmendia kept making music, embracing a different approach which focused on instrumental ambient compositions. He manifested a love for creating the atmospheric worlds that mirrored the character of his paintings. Garmendia's experiments with music and comic illustration never obscured the serious nature of his paintings. These other endeavors were natural extensions of his creative capacity, more like hobbies. Nevertheless, he was a deeply talented musician.

From the late 80s to the early 90s, Garmendia lived in Madrid. A city with many possibilities for artists, materials were cheap, as was life in general. A contingent of German painters lived in Madrid on and off during this period: Georg Dokoupil, Albert Oehlen, and Martin Kippenberger. For a time, Garmendia and Dokoupil had studios in the same building. Dokoupil was amused by the fact that Garmendia had installed a camping tent in the middle of his studio where he normally slept. Garmendia always kept a fond memory of having witnessed the process of Dokoupil's now well-known *soot paintings*, meticulous figurative paintings where candle fire became a substitute for a paint brush.

Architecture and landscape are essential themes in Garmendia's oeuvre. The artist possessed a subversive attitude and an ingenious approach when dealing with these broad subjects. Ultimately, the aesthetic structure and formal aspects of these visual genres served as a point of departure for a plethora of images, executed in a variety of ways. He believed in distorting any kind of

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logical connection with reality; documenting the non-existent; creating physically impossible scenarios; not conforming to one style; and ultimately, presenting a distanced metaphysical vision of the world which evokes estrangement, alienation, and disorientation. These principles reveal the ethos of the work, and distinguish and illuminate his distinct artistic identity.



Alejandro Garmendia, *Untitled*, 2015, oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm, (64 x 51 inches)

Pintura sucia ("Dirty Paintings") is the term the artist used to describe his late paintings that deal with landscape. In the mid-1980s, various canvases and drawings pay homage to the influential Italian surrealist, Giorgio de Chirico. Many pictorial motifs are taken directly from the iconic metaphysical landscapes the artist is famous for. This early preoccupation with de Chirico would reoccur through the mature phases of Alejandro's work; Garmendia included excerpts from, *Memorie della mia vita*, the Italian painter's memoirs, in the majority of his exhibition catalogues as an homage to the legendary artist. Other early art historical references point to Salvador Dalí, whose fragmented subconscious terrestrial scenes are also a profound source of inspiration. These are the roots of his relationship with the landscape genre, however, they still represent

literal experiments with the surrealist lineage he always admired. In fact, he painted over all of those references in his Dirty Paintings. With these works, Garmendia refined his approach, creating his own aesthetic of destruction and repairedness.



Alejandro Garmendia, *Untitled*, 1998-2004, oil and resin on canvas, 135 x 135 cm, (53 x 53 inches)

Why dirty? Paintings lying around with no audience to appreciate them collect dust naturally. Perhaps it reflects the muddy, even ugly appearance of these paintings. The apocalyptic natural world depicted in these pictures reflect a somber contemplative mental space. Garmendia never praised these works or what he possibly achieved by making them. The completion of these canvases was always unclear; in many paintings, buried underneath the final result, are layers of other pictorial mise en scènes the author chose to deface. The pairing of the concept dirty, and these landscapes, is as if the artist is questioning the legitimacy of the act of painting itself and the impulse of making something even remotely pastoral in the 21st century; an ironic and subversive gesture which illustrates an awareness over the risky subject matter he's utilizing. Risky because of the odd timing of these pictures, which seem opposed to avant-garde contemporary tendencies and the general trajectory of modern art. In any case, all of these works have reoccurring formal qualities: a composition with a de Chirico-like infinite horizon line that cuts across each canvas, demarcation of sky and foreground, forms that resemble floating objects in a submerged environment, an earthy palette with a propensity for green, gray and



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various ochre tones and the occasional blue, a weathered surface with layers of varnish, resin and oil paint, and expressionistic brushwork. The spectator is confronted with an imaginary natural disaster. A combination of red and blue light illuminate the tension between pyramidal structures and an enveloping storm permeating everything in its path. An idiosyncratic vision of nature. Architectural elements accompanied by their shadows, with pictorial qualities which resonate with Dali. Nature reappears in another tumultuous state of transformation, a desolate landscape stripped of any expression of life besides a chair and a moon-like form with tentacles attached to the top of it. This lonesome domestic object, rendered in a loose figurative manner reminiscent of Baselitz's renowned *Heroes* paintings, is being slowly disintegrated by this unknown creature's grip. A menacing extraterrestrial being has taken hold of its surroundings. This suffocating environment lends these works an emotional character filled with solitude, and atmospheric texture ridden with melancholy. A metaphor for the disparity between his way of seeing and what can be defined as objective reality.

The style of this series evokes a heterogeneous mix of painting approaches: naturalistic representation, surrealist automatism, abstraction, expressionism, and figuration. Ultimately, the artist never believed in having one signature style. Images could have many different kinds of appearances, a conviction which resonates with many artists he deeply respected: Richter, Polke, Schnabel, Oehlen. Nonetheless, Garmendia's interest in unconventional techniques and execution always led to unexpected results. The process of these "Dirty Paintings" is worth trying to understand. Although one can only speculate based on certain known facts and other things which remain a mystery: messy automatic execution; images materializing through chance; a state of frenzy where the fragile trajectory of pictures are motivated by sacred accidents; leaps of time; long intervals between sessions and an accumulation of layers — layers of time, images, and accidents — which lead to completion of vision. In fact, maybe what is so dirty is the process. All of these factors facilitate the enigmatic pictorial result Garmendia yearns for.

As a young adult, Garmendia would hint at the idea of becoming an architect. One night in Madrid during the late 80s, he and a friend stole a handful of architecture magazines from a swanky party at an architect's house. These print publications of Spanish and German origin cover a broad period ranging from 1900 through the 1920s; the older magazines feature Art Nouveau interiors and the later ones show the early stages of Art Deco. These historical documents became the foundation of the

invented architectural spaces which played a prominent role in the last 30 years of his artistic production.



Alejandro Garmendia, *Manigua Aerea*, 2005-2006, oil on canvas, 205 x 210 cm (81 x 83 inches)

This precious source material granted Garmendia the opportunity to execute a series of small-scale photomontages of imaginary architectural spaces. These black and white collage works are all roughly 11 x 14 centimeters, the majority have been left untitled. The artist began this series by pasting and gluing together cutouts of interiors, fragments of different rooms. Scenes of collapsing ceilings, corridors, stairs, chandeliers, and corner angles result in a world where scale and plane are mixed together until gravity ceases to exist. Disorienting scenes of decontextualized architecture, guided by the artist's principle of distorting any logical connections to one's physical surroundings become a new aesthetic and metaphysical order. These small collage studies grew into larger works the artist would execute and other more ambitious plans that were never realized in his lifetime. The Imagery in these works was realized with an array of techniques: photo-emulsion, photo-realistic painting methods, digital experiments with photoshop, abstraction, and sculpture. For Garmendia, there seemed to be a correlation between technical experimentation, and the kind of unusual worlds he was interested in making. After the original photomontage pieces from the early 90s came the artist's experiments with photo-emulsion; an ambitious dark room process, due to the large format of many works which exceeded life-size. The photo-emulsion works were stretched like paintings; grainy image quality and an ochre

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palette are some of their most recognizable features. One sees different versions of odd domestic environments. Shifting phantasmagorical objects transform what we are looking at into another kind of space. Despite the presence of household objects, life seems to have left this place long ago, conveying a deep sense of emptiness. *El Ingenio Revolucionario* (1994-1998) shows us a perplexing room with a desolate atmosphere: one sees a banister, doors, a staircase, a fragment of a ceiling — which projects into the picture plane like a jagged cliff — but as a whole, this unfamiliar place does not resemble anything from the real world as we know it. A mysterious realm, long gone and forgotten. The subtle yellow varnish that washes over the surface helps eternalize time, a characteristic of both what that moment might have looked like, as well as the evidence that time has passed by.



Alejandro Garmendia, *Untitled*, 2003, oil and resin on canvas, 190 x 170 cm, (79 x 94 inches)

Garmendia always intended to build these imaginary spaces in the original series of photomontages into real rooms; due to health and financial issues these projects were never realized. Even though these small pieces gave birth to a variety of other works, he felt a strong desire to

go even further with these plans. For him, certain images and ideas projected different kinds of scale, and could be interpreted with different mediums; a creative aspect which resonates with the practice of Bruce Nauman. Throughout

his vast career, Nauman has created a wide range of maquettes and prototypes intended to become larger sculptural manifestations; some of these visions have been completed and others have remained blueprints. Nonetheless, *El Ingenio Revolucionario* (1994 – 1998) was the only work from this series that Garmendia had begun to create into a three-dimensional installation. A sculpture bearing the same title, *El Ingenio Revolucionario* (2003-2004), is a mimetic sculptural representation of the object in the foreground of the image. This object is — roughly three feet high and five feet wide — a hybrid between a table and a chandelier. Presumably, a functional object at one point in time, belonging to somewhere in one of those stolen realities.



Alejandro Garmendia, *Untitled*, 1995, photomontage, 57 x 48 cm (framed dimensions), (22 x 19 inches)

A non-existent parallel universe, a world and a domestic world similarly murky, the appearance of objects floating, feeling submerged, architectural interiors, physical space collapsing in front of one's eyes. A disorienting claustrophobic sense of drowning. Drowning in what? Perhaps the mind's subversion of reality and memory. A melancholic dream state. In an absurd reimagining of the world; stories and anecdotes of faulty memory. A concentrated metaphysical gaze, capable of noticing the ghostly appearance of familiar objects and quotidian spaces (San Martín, *Pintores Vascos*: p. 56). The visual tumult caused by the image comes from



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this decontextualization between object and environment, but also from an undefinable feeling of catastrophe (San Martín, *Pintores Vascos*: p. 56). Alejandro Garmendia has mined the realms that obscure the linear narratives of the everyday, of the every year, of the every all of our lives. El ingenio revolucionario.