

***The Conquest of the Impossible*, by Javier Martín-Jiménez**

In 1971, two years after man's first landing on the Moon, the United States' Apollo 15 mission again carried several astronauts to a lunar destination. That was the fourth visit and there would later be a fifth, so in all, twelve men have walked on the Moon.

Apollo 15 made James B. Irwin the eighth man on the Moon and the experience of outer space changed his perception of life. He returned to Earth with a clearly mystical bent: "This experience has made me feel the power of God, something I had never felt before," he said at the time. A year later he founded the Christian religious group, High Flight, and he went on to spend much of his life seeking Noah's ark. In the nineteen eighties, Irwin led seven successive expeditions to Mount Ararat, where the Bible vaguely states that the ark finally ran aground. Ararat is located in an isolated part of Eastern Turkey, a strategic space during the Cold War and still a military zone today. Its altitude and inclement weather, as well as its limited access—for political and military reasons—prevented Irwin from reaching his goal. Moreover, he very nearly lost his life in two different accidents, once while climbing the mountain and again while flying over the area.

Irwin died of a heart attack in 1991 at the age of 61. He was the first lunar astronaut to do so.

The Conquest of the Impossible is a group show by 16 artists who explore humankind's relations with Nature. It is a broad but incomplete exhibition, much like Irwin's inconclusive odyssey. It could be expanded with more examples that study the multiple ties that relate humans and their environment. The selected projects weave a network of nodes that connect each with the others in a very modular manner. One cannot speak of the show in terms of a beginning or end, but rather in terms of the multiple connections among its works. The life of James Irwin exemplifies many of these artists' interests: sublimation of beauty, awareness that they are part of a natural whole, ambiguity between earthly and divine, confrontation of original and artificial, desire to overcome and conquer, a chimerical struggle against the elements, fascination with the unknown, uncertainty about the future, natural laws that escape human control and the infinite damage inflicted on the environment by civilizations.

Regarding history's first artificial satellite, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan wrote: "After Sputnik, there is no nature, only art." **Belén Rodríguez** worked with this sentence in her contemporary meteorites, which include phosphoric elements and current refuse such as bits of plastic; and also in her drawings of implosions/explosions of colored objects, where the esthetic merges with chance and the unforeseen. **Zoé T. Vizcaíno** focuses her research on a physical phenomenon similar to the result of shockwaves. Here, it is the powerful centrifugal force of the *Maelström*, that large whirlpool off the northern coast of Norway's Lofoten Archipelago in the province of Nordland. The artist has mapped this natural phenomenon with fourteen "landscape units" that capture frozen moments from such chaotic and hypnotic force. **Ángel Masip** proposes landscape as a vital experience. His work is characterized by various ambiguities: natural versus artificial, image versus copy (positive or negative), consciousness versus unconsciousness, and so on. He also plays with the layers of an image, as well as with its transparencies and shadows. All of this hampers the perception of what has been painted or printed.

Javier Arce's investigation stems from a stay on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, one of the few "earthly paradises" that retains part of its original virgin spirit, barely invaded by civilization. Javier discovered that people living on that island maintain a natural, non-aggressive equilibrium with their surroundings. His research led him to the thesis of French geographer Élisée Reclus, creator of Social Geography and scholar of nature in its relation to human beings. An indefatigable traveler, Reclus defended living in harmony with nature and constant contact with it to foster sustainable and fair progress. **Julia Rometti and Víctor Costales**, who can also be considered "nomads," carry out fictional anthropological investigations. Here, their study focuses on a neo-tropical region where they study both botanical aspects and those related to its inhabitants in a very broad spectrum. The documents from their research are photocopies of publications discovered in second-hand bookstores.

Misha de Ridder offers another way of approaching nature in his artist's book, a serial work that is presented as a bound tome with the pages perforated close to the spine. Misha proposes that viewers participate by tearing out the pages along the dotted line to assemble two different images of wooded landscapes—one from spring, the other from fall—like puzzles. But Ridder is not offering a poetic vision of landscape; by using offset printing, he forces the images into dot matrices like those on the large advertising posters found in any city. This is a language close to mechanical and industrial processes of image reproduction far removed from the experience offered by immersion in a natural landscape. **Mito Gegič** also breaks with customary modes of seeing, as image distortion is one of his lines of investigation. His works transfer (immaterial) digital images to (material) painted images. But in this process, the image itself is destroyed, loses information and deteriorates. Like some digital archives, which become damaged or lose data when they are copied or manipulated, or simply change. Mito is interested in images linked to rural traditions such as hunting, an activity he knows through his family but does not share. Thus, the dead animals in his works become abstract and lose their original color.

The powerful, iconic and widely reproduced image of the spectacularly pyramidal Matterhorn, the Alps' best-known mountain, was the starting point for **Pedro Luis Cembranos'** investigation of the different ways it has been used. In recent history, this mountain was chosen as a finalist in the seven natural wonders of the world, lent its name to a rollercoaster in Disneyland, inspired the logo of the famous Toblerone chocolates and even appeared in a chapter of *The Simpsons*. According to Pedro Luis, landscape can also be the object of manipulation through its different modes of representation. Thus the large mural he presents with the mountain's image is fragmented, out of order and out of focus. Similarly, **Liudmila and Nelso** assign a new meaning to an iconic image from the history of art. They use Hokusai's *The Great Wave* to mark the sea as a natural frontier, but also a political one. The original landscape is one of many works intended to represent Mount Fuji, considered sacred and symbolic of Japan's national identity. In the foreground, a gigantic wave is at its highest and most threatening moment, just about to break furiously over some fragile boats bearing oarsmen. Liudmila and Nelso construct their image from multiple photographs of Cuban *balseros* who tried to cross the Straits of Florida in 1994.

Tamás Kaszás imagines or futurizes a society forced to adapt to the depletion of a natural resource as indispensable today as petroleum. Faced with the collapse of production, the artist proposes two possible paths for the development of civilization: either the creation of new layers of oppressive power, or a return to productive processes of basic agriculture and animal husbandry. He uses two agit-prop posters to communicate these ideas. **Maria García-Ibáñez** also investigates time, linking it to the history of the Earth. Pangea is the beginning of the world we inhabit, evolving and moving constantly, even though we do not notice it. There are even remains of the beings that lived here millions of years ago. They are now extinct but we still share certain elements with them, such as cell structure.

The art of **Jerónimo Hagerman** revolves around an analysis of the relation between the subject and his/her surroundings, especially the manner in which he or she generates emotional links between the individual and nature. The images he has selected for the show represent a small part of the photo diary where he records some of the surprising results of that fusion. There we find, for example, apparently wild landscapes that nonetheless sport some element that breaks the harmony and indicates human intrusion, or the unstoppable and uncontrollable growth of plants, even in urban settings. **László Hatházi** works in the opposite direction, focusing on the feelings of plants to ironically analyze pseudo-scientific documents that attempt to measure the effects of their surroundings on their growth. If plants listen to classical music, will they grow stronger and healthier? Can a polygraph or other electronic mechanism plugged into a plant truly measure its reactions?

Elena Nieto López is attracted to the small objects she finds in places where she has the nearest and most immediate access to nature: parks, vacation spots or the local neighborhood market. Like a child who stores "treasures in her pockets," Elena collects and meticulously documents bits of dry branches, common shells, fruits and vegetables as if she were an urban botanist. With a similar method, based on the observation and collection of elements she finds in passing, **Sara Bjarland** investigates how the artificial can "seem" natural, tricking the viewer. She is fascinated by the ambiguity produced when synthetic materials such as plastic begin to imitate or simulate

natural materials. Therefore, in her videos, she uses such inert and artificial elements as plastic bags or polystyrene spheres, bringing them to “life” by imitating organic movement.

Finally, the image captured by **Emma Crichton**'s camera is tragic: the trunk of a 'pita' plant lying in a ditch like a cadaver waiting to be covered. The 'pita' is a monocarpic plant that flowers only once in its life and dies directly afterwards.

This exhibition has an added component that plays with the viewer's perception: a show of graphic art with almost no engravings. The language used owes much to graphic art, making it seem like something it is not, because the techniques employed have little to do with traditional printmaking. Appearances can be misleading, and only when the viewer looks very closely at the works or reads its label will he recognize the drawing, photocopy, digital print or other materials such as fabric. As is only right, techniques are not determinant, they should only help to narrate the message.