

Islados: Liminal Crossings

At first glance, *Islados*, a series of monochromatic, mixed-media seascapes by the contemporary Spanish artist Manuel Valencia, seems to stage a poetics of the inner sanctum, drawing from the artistic legacy of Romanticism, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism. In open marine vistas, Valencia's two-tiered compositions usher forth an ocean horizon, submersed in an illusory dream, as a distant periphery that evokes a poignant confluence of the complete and the unattainable. Reminiscent of the spectral horizons seen in the spiritually inspired works of Mark Rothko, Cy Twombly and Gerard Richter, Valencia's *Islados* envelopes our eyes in an immense visual field, evoking a sensory experience of infinity, and internalizing the sublime as if an extension of the self. In an artist statement, Valencia describes *Islados* as "A dream with a start and an end, but no shoreline. The artist's loneliness, empty and wide like the sea, an isolated being, secluded but independent...an endless landscape but only in the limit of our eyesight."

The act of seeing, upon the threshold between darkness and light, is an emotive response that has historically enthralled thinkers and artists over time and across cultures. It is that momentary crossover of realms when subjectivity is transferred from a primal consciousness towards a heightened self-awareness, from body to mind. Through an experience of light differentials, a boundary on the cusp of inner consciousness emerges. Fraught with enriched meanings and interpretations in philosophy, science, literature, and psychology, as such, it is inevitable that such a boundary would also yield itself to the most inspired artistic interpretations.

Yet *Islados* is galvanized by a more complex vision than being simply distilled, lyrically romantic self-portraits of the lone artist. When evaluated in the cross-cultural palette of methodology and media in which Valencia actively engages, something new, original, and intriguingly significant about *Islados* emerges.

Born in Madrid, Valencia was raised along the shores of Spain's northern Basque country. Passionate about art, in youth, he had visited studios of Spanish and Dutch artists known especially for their sensitivity to light and for openness to chance and spontaneity in the creative process. Valencia's four years of training in Stichting de Vrije Academie voor Beeldende Kunst, The Hague, Netherlands grounded him in drawing, composition and contemporary theory. He trained as a figurative artist for nearly fourteen years, leaning on surrealism, also familiarizing himself on canvas and wood, with acrylic, watercolor, and tempera glazing technique of Dutch and Flemish Renaissance. A seasoned world traveler given his former occupation as a full-time businessman, Valencia admits being "porous to external influences" and open to explore what he calls "the sediments from life experiences." A trip to Kyoto fifteen years ago was an eye-opening experience that regaled his sensuality to the Chinese aesthetics of the Tang and the Song dynasties. The revelation of Asian aesthetics as an alternative way of seeing and creating, according to Valencia, "had changed me as a man, as an artist."

Valencia calls *Islados*, "Landscape of strings...a fight between concept and emotion against a dramatic background." From frame to frame, lines gesticulating such psychosomatic tensions are rampant. In the form of mangled threads, found yarn, and twisted fibrous paper strings, a spectrum of undulating lines protrude from Valencia's ink-brushed surface, engaging our eye in a raw optical dance. Adventurous, edgy and exuberant, Valencia's rugged lines seemingly resonate with the abandon of cursive calligraphic script. They exalt a similar freedom in the process of becoming and a brimming energy as if brushwork in execution.

Fastened onto the supple leniency of Chinese rice paper, his gnarling lines of threads wage a gestural performance against established artistic conventions. Like characters on a theatrical stage, his lines rhythmically pulsate, at times in a murmuring whisper, at times in a thunderous torrent, taking the shapes of small letters, poetic stanzas, storms, atmospheric winds, explosions, and eruptions, crisscrossing and converging into wavelengths of dots, scribbles, knots, and turbulence. Visible here is not a mere invitation into a mindful infinity, but rather, the artist's deliberate hand at

gouging, scrapping and scratching, and his conscious effort at deconstruction and reconstruction. Between carnality and abstraction, Valencia fashions lines, forms, and materials that protrude three-dimensionally, like bodily extensions dominating the space. In more than a few works, a leftward shore juts forth repeatedly, butting into the ocean to intercept the horizon. More animalistic than passive, in their edgy embodiments, these left banks molded from paper-Mache repeatedly exert their muscular contortions. They are carnal, visceral, barbaric things that interfere to thwart our gaze towards the infinite.

Valencia's inventive shape of the shore, the mountains, and the lines, exude a visceral strength, authoritatively possessing the space in which they are placed. Valencia uses literary elements to imbue his art with meaning. In one notable piece, he alludes to the nihilist themes of death, void, and despair, handwriting stanzas directly from T.S. Eliot's elegiac post-war poem, "The Hollow Man." The themes of translucency and fragility, in its open-endedness to crossings and destruction, also come to play a portentous role in Valencia's art. In a haunting installation, Valencia lifts the entire spectrum of his fibrous threads, off the canvas, suspending them as if a faint curtain of torn webs, making the piece, accessible from all views, but ultimately vulnerable and eroding in form and material.

On a paper surface such as the Chinese rice paper, especially one that is intimately loaded with cultural and historical references to spatiotemporal seclusions, Valencia's stringed seascapes wage a sensory battle, to stretch open a volatile horizon of sensual guises and quintessentially calling into question our acculturated habits of seeing at the threshold of perception. From frame to frame, the viewer is lured into an open-ended identification process that is at once afloat, disconnected, always negotiating for coherence, but never ending. *Islados* solicits us to enter into an open acceptance of conflated recognitions across borderlines and boundaries. It is from this view that Valencia's own dual identity as an artist and as the incumbent Ambassador of Spain to China becomes a stirring embodiment of an authentic, all-consuming aesthetic experience at the crossing of the self and the world.

An essay for the artist Manuel Valencia
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By Yiling Mao *
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* East Asian Languages and Civilizations concentrator with specialization in fine art in Harvard College (1991) and Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences(1994). M.Phil degree in Art History and Archaeology from Columbia University(1997). Former director of Sotheby's, currently China advisory board member of the Lincoln Center, special advisor to the Sotheby's Institute of Art, and the founder and executive director of Art Collectives.