

Stephanie Nava – Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

The phrase most commonly used to define stage design is that of “scenic space,” i.e. the space of the “mise-en-scène,” of the staging, the one where the action takes place. In its role of an ideal bridge between architecture and art, another essential component of stage design is that of creating settings whose purpose is to simulate reality. Behind this two-dimensional world is concealed a neutral space, intended to provide a haven for the characters when they emerge from a dimension that makes a decisive contribution to legitimizing their fictitious identity. The majority of members of the audience, like the rest of the fauna that populates the universe of the theater, describe this moment as the “exit.” Stéphanie Nava, however, belongs to that inner circle which can't help thinking of these figures as “no longer visible” rather than having “exited,” and continues to follow them mentally into the “limbo” that separates them from the real world and from that of the stage.

Nava came to fine art via initial interest in stage design, following the idea of studying architecture, preferring in the end to go for something that would allow her to express her creative impulse and imagination without obliging her to submit to the rules of mathematics and engineering. Her characters are rarely visible, and when they are, appear in almost ectoplasmic form, in a temporal game on paper not unlike some of the video-architectural experiments made by Dan Graham in the seventies. While remaining on the sidelines, they are the true protagonists of her work along with the concept of the city, of its topographic and demographic growth and above all its apparent inability to react suitably to changes that have after all been looming for some time. If on the one hand her sculpture representing a group of pseudo-modernist buildings held together precariously by a rubber band represents in a fairly direct way the intensity of a large urban center, on the other it reflects a problem that is far from secondary in a city like London, where the artist has been living for years, that of having to deal on a daily basis with a situation designed for a certain number of people but which now accommodates about twice as many. The only reason why the rubber band doesn't break is that, in the same way as actors leave the stage and take refuge in their neutral space, a substantial number of city dwellers leave these urban centers for the stability and certainty of a cardboard suburb, where they can take a breather and at least for a little while observe from the outside a scene of which they regularly form part, and to which they know they will eventually have to return. Such an intensity is also to be found in her drawings, where we see people who have visited the same place at two different moments superimposed in a game that seems to seal a virtual encounter between their body and their unconscious, halfway between the spiritual and the supernatural.

Nava's socio-architectural investigations find a further and perhaps unexpected connection in the places in which the artist was born and where the exhibition is being held, Marseilles and Milan. At first sight it is hard to imagine two more distant situations, but on closer examination it is possible to discern several points in common: an untidy expansion, a social fabric in perennial change and the status of outlying metropolis, which puts them in an antagonistic relationship with their respective capitals in geographical, cultural and economic terms. Above all they are two cities frantically in search of an identity, struggling valiantly against the uncertainty of whether to defend the heritage that has defined their past or to embrace the frenzy of the contemporary world which will determine their future. Like in a factory where managerial plans and workforce march to two different rhythms, Milan and Marseilles, as well as many other cities in the world, export their contradictions and are held together by a population that is numerous and variegated but not rooted or cohesive, creating a fragile equilibrium, just like that of Nava's “packaged” city. The chaos, the noise, the traffic cannot be seen or heard, but it is easy to imagine their intensity bringing these cardboard cutouts to life. Shut up like a clam, Nava's city vulnerably reveals its soul, a vital but contaminated and hidden element, just like the 70% of water of which our body is made up, and that in the artist's drawings regains its importance by taking the form of roots molded and traversed by the longest watercourses in the world.

Usually it is not a good idea to let the biographical data of an artist interfere too much with the perception of his or her work, but the fact that Stéphanie Nava spent the early years of her life in one of Le Corbusier's “essential” houses, the ones that according to the visionary Swiss architect should have brought us a better society, as the offspring of a better architecture, is relevant. In addition to her intrinsic interest in architecture it explains, at least partially, her impulse to explore structure, practicability and the routes of communication that can be seen in the sections of buildings drawn by the artist, where

conduits, pipes and electric cables are protagonists and bring to the foreground those imperceptible channels connecting the inhabitants, as if to confirm the existence of a subterranean connection, sometimes unknown but always solid, between their occupants. It was precisely these structures, the product of scientific calculation and the rules of logic and of practice, that put Nava off architecture in the first place. Perhaps the circle has now been closed.

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