

The Symbolic House

Paula Toto Blake

Emilio Caraffa Museum

Dec. 2018 / Mar. 2019

Genesis and destruction

The city of La Plata holds a captivatingly foundational genesis. Unlike other cities in the country, the founding element is set in the straddled grids between the vicerojal administration and clerical iconologies. The structural layout of La Plata urban fabric is a masonic symbol. Designed using precision tools such as compass, square, level gauge, plumb line, the city plan responds to the zeitgeist of a progressive, masonic-lodge age imbued with ethical, political and social values, anti-clerical and enlightened.

Paula Toto Blake's works, exhibited in Room 1 at the Caraffa Museum, emerge from an in-depth research on the city of La Plata, its foundational, masonic past. This genesis, rooted in the values of enlightened progress during late XIX century, contrasts with the experienced destruction suffered by the city in 2013 flood, as the enraged and devastated population blamed the State administration for the tragedy. On April 2nd, La Plata collapsed when a dam burst after torrential rain. On that very day, Toto Blake exhibition *Fragility* was being dismantled in Buenos Aires. The show gathered a photographic series of destruction vestiges and the passing of time, like traces of human frailty facing death. La Plata is her home town, where the artist's family resides. A coincidence of her reference to frailty and the collapse of La Plata encouraged Toto Blake to start off *The Symbolic House* presented today. The tragic events lived in those days, the experience of that close community, the water marks on the city walls after the flood prompted an endeavor to archive and research on both the city history and current events.

A modern past crammed with symbology and masonic iconology. Present times signalled by catastrophe and desolation. The duality of images looking like an oximoron. Paradoxes between that which endures and that which falls; between the monument as a symbol of History's authority and the anti-monument in need of memories and unique experiences. The symbolically masonic outline overlaps with photographs of monuments -icons of power and knowledge. The shapeless fabric of destruction rises in a dual procedure carried out by the artist: the same buildings are transformed into anti-monuments by its own cracks. Images appear like devices, a complex web of power signs (key buildings that shaped the institutional, political, academic authority), and academic institutions (knowledge regarded as the very heart within masonic activities, the hegemony of scientific discourses...)

The cancelled context of the photographs accounts for another key signified in Toto Blake's works. Images appear to lack temporality, turn one's gaze on some historyless realm. Undoubtedly paradoxical actually, as history turns out to be the founding element in the poetic process of creating these images. However, past and memory concentrate on diverse image

planes, the building, the monument, the location and then, the masonic symbology, or traces left off by current destruction. History seems to condense there but appears anachronistic on the rest of the photograph. No "feel", no atmosphere, it is unknown either what the day looks like or which traces of nature emerge from the image . As if temporality was just framed within the physical traits of monumental concrete. Thus, her works bear some reminiscence of Bernd & Hilla Becher conceptual photography, where technical resources fit to convey a sense of natural quality in her images , forcing our gaze to focus on the monument turned into a ruin, an anti-monument.

Something seems to be at stake in this dichotomy: the monuments of knowledge and power turn into dual iconographies , pertain to a foundation of masonic lodges as they reveal their everlasting condition, always pending to become anti-monument, in the traces of imminent destruction. It is of the interest of Paula Toto Blake to reveal the multiple dimensions underneath the fabric of this geography.

Carina Cagnolo

Curator