

THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ISLAND

IRENE DE ANDRÉS *SHIPWRECKED SPECIES* FROM 17.11.2017 TO 7.1.2018

EXHIBITION SERIES CURATED
BY ALEXANDRA LAUDO

“Especies náufragas” (shipwrecked species) is the term used in the Colombian legal system to refer to all objects and materials of cultural, historical, artistic, or archaeological value located on the ocean floor within the country’s territorial waters. Around one thousand sunken galleons are believed to lie off Colombia’s coasts, with an estimated total value of seven to ten billion dollars. In recent years this situation has sparked intense debate and significant legislative action intended to regulate the ownership and exploitation rights of these “species”, particularly following the discovery of the galleon San José in November 2015. This flagship of the Spanish Armada, which had sunk in the battle of Barú more than three hundred years earlier, was found two hundred metres under the sea near the Rosario Islands. At the time it went down, the San José was laden with extremely valuable cargo, so the finding of the galleon and the possibility of refloating it led to high tensions between the Colombian government – which had located the ship in its territorial waters -, the American company Sea Search Armada – which claimed to have notified the coordinates of the location of the ship many years earlier – and the Spanish government – which argued that the galleon should be granted sovereign immunity as applied to State vessels.

In her project for Espai 13, Irene de Andrés presents an ensemble of pieces comprising videos, photographs, documents, texts, sculptural elements and found objects which function as a constellation that allows her to explore the case of the San José from different angles, including historical, economic, sociological, and literary aspects. Steering clear of a strongly historicist approach, the project sets up anachronistic, atemporal links between this event from the distant past, the situation in Colombia today, and possible future developments. De Andrés interprets the tensions that the discovery of the shipwreck raised within the context of current

post-colonial relations and examines the new socio-economic framework in which connections emerge between colonialism and the tourism industry in and around the Rosario Islands. She also taps the poetic potential of the concept of a shipwreck, interpreting the wreckage as a time capsule which, once discovered, abruptly opens up a previous time frame in the present.

The layout of the pieces in the space critically evokes the nineteenth century aesthetic of many maritime museums, which magnify the value of documents, historical objects, and archaeological remains, putting them at the service of a supposedly univocal account of history. De Andrés adopts some of the museological devices typical of these kinds of museums (display cabinets, pedestals, etc.), but she does so for the opposite purpose: to develop a plural, fragmented narrative that disrupts chronological order and the conventions of historical and scientific interpretation by introducing poetic elements. Accordingly, the exhibition space contains assortments of very diverse elements that the artist has grouped together in keeping with the logic of collage. A newspaper article announcing the discovery of the San José is displayed alongside a page from the book *Love in the Time of Cholera* in which the sinking of the galleon is mentioned. Another group of items includes a drawing in which the artist has mapped Colombia’s maritime borders and an abstract representation of the underwater surveys that led to the discovery of the San Jose. There is also a travel brochure for the city of Cartagena which has been modified by the artist, and a reproduction of a detail of the painting *Wager’s Action off Cartagena, 28 May 1708*, by Samuel Scott, which belongs to the National Maritime Museum of London and portrays the battle in which the galleon sunk.

The copper plates used by the artist to produce photoengravings of underwater images of the sunken

galleon are displayed in a glass cabinet, alongside aerial photographs of the shipwreck area that bring to mind military surveillance and control operations, but also the control of space in contemporary life through image production and geolocation technologies. A series of photographs showing the hands of the various agents involved in the process of the discovery of the San José (from an employee of Sea Search Armada to the Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos) introduces a language of gestures with colonial echoes associated with the conquest, control, and ownership of the spoils.

The videos in the exhibition – all of which feature the presence of birds at some point – also express different ways of looking at the discovery and exploration of the territory. They bring to light, through documentary and allegorical strategies, the unequal relations between foreign and local agents, the links between colonialism and tourism, and the contrast between navigation for trade and leisure cruises. Still images showing the routes of the galleon San José and various cruise ships are also projected on the walls in the space.

In resonance with the contradiction implicit in the expression that gives the exhibition its title – “species” does not refer to living beings but to certain inanimate elements – Irene de Andrés presents, on pedestals, several dichotomous sculptures in which the choice of certain materials alters the correspondence between form and content, between surface and depth: a ceramic cannonball, an ingot filled with water from the Caribbean, a sea snail stuffed with lead, and another snail that has been cast in bronze... Either in their form or through the connotations of the materials they are made from – many of which are used in weapons – these sculptural elements are a direct reference to the war that led to the sinking of the San José, and to its wreckage. A handful of coins stuck together – euros, Colombian pesos, and American dollars, the currencies of the three countries involved in the dispute over

the galleon – brings to mind the imagery of treasure. But it is also a reference to the commercialisation and economic exploitation of the San José by the Colombian government, which has announced plans to refloat it and turn it into a museum.

On another pedestal, a mapmaker’s magnifying glass is another reference to particular ways of understanding and representing the territory, in this case technical and scientific knowledge, but also political power. The object emits a sound that reproduces the mysterious “Rossby whistle”: a continuous sound that radiates from the depths of the Caribbean sea and is so loud that it can be picked up by satellites in space. This vertical jet of sound that is pushed up from below, crossing the ocean and shooting out into space, becomes the epitome of the dichotomous relationship between depth and surface, which is the leitmotif that inspires the project as a whole and can be found in each of the works in the exhibition.

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