

In praise of failure

Concha Jiménez Muñoz

Translation from the Spanish by Irene Hidalgo Caparrós and Erica Piasecka

Author's note:

For most of the pandemic, my only link to my usual world of poets, illustrators and photographers was through a digital screen (at the rate of about four video calls a week).

This essay explores the affective and creative processes behind my two most recent exhibitions: *Lo insondable* (exhibited for the last time in February 2020) and *Nada que ver* (current project), both of which were considerably shaped by the lockdown, travel restrictions and the unusual working hours with which we were required to comply.

As a woman, mother and artist, I explore here the creative possibilities of isolation, austerity and abandonment.

For a reading experience that best approximates the exhibitions I discuss, I recommend playing [this sound file](#) in the background from this point on.

The Shore

A wave comes without stretching too far
and another one
with a vague line spacing,
constant,
and a background sound that never stops.

Further back, a place we won't reach
not even when the sun shines.

Creating from stasis

Constant positions and immovable circumstances become wearing, and ultimately, destructive. When changes are imperceptible, deterioration is constant. And there is no turning back. Such was my feeling while looking over some old photographs of a boy windsurfing on the sea. What really struck me was not the frozen movement of the sea, the sail or the young man's body, but the yellowish stains that in less than fifteen years had arbitrarily emerged on the image due to the inevitable ageing of the printed photograph.



Figure 1: The boy (Jiménez Muñoz 2006)

With these photographs as my guide, I began to paint the sea on a small board. I blurred the waves and dirtied the blue of the sky and the white of the foam. I omitted the young man and the windsurf sail. I felt the need to cut the surface into a circle like the viewfinder or lens of a camera. I used resin to simulate the varnish on the photographs and deliberately yellowed the surface. I wanted to represent the brightness of old photo albums, that desire to preserve and protect family pictures. I wanted to repeat the result in a larger format and so began a series of seven seas in total, with the horizon at different heights, framed in circles and varnished with resin. This led to the art project, *Lo insondable*, to which I devoted two years of work.

[NOTE: In English, "lo insondable" loosely translates as "the unfathomable", but also means "bottomless", as in "the bottomless sea"]



Figura 2: Mar I (Jiménez Muñoz 2019a)

The exhibition *Lo insondable* was overwhelming for me. The circular paintings of the sea were like windows, creating the effect in the viewer of being underwater. The sound installation, videos and other works created a kind of dystopian reverie and absence that was somewhat disturbing. The white sculpture of a girl, standing next to her bed in her room, stood watching from the very centre of the scene.

Video view of *Lo insondable*



Figure 3: View of exhibition *Lo insondable* (Jiménez Muñoz 2019c)

Lo insondable was exhibited for the last time in February 2020, just before the State of Emergency brought on by the pandemic.



Figure 4: Photographic Memory (Jiménez Muñoz 2019b)

Creating non-digital memories

The boy in the photographs that inspired *Lo insondable* is my brother. Although I didn't depict him in any of the circular paintings, his absence was central to the project. My brother died in a road accident in February 2007, the same year Facebook invaded our lives. Because of this catastrophe, he didn't have time to create an account on that “pioneering” social network site, let alone Instagram. I have barely fifty or so photographs of him. Fifty pictures in the lifetime of a 27-year-old, when compared to the number of photographs any young man of the same age might have of himself today, is nothing.

Another difference is that these few memories of my brother are printed and subject to imperceptible but constant deterioration. Much of our reality is virtual and the digital image has replaced its physical counterpart with ease. Now more than ever, our window on the world is a screen, and yet the surface of the screen is too smooth to touch (even flatter and more immutable than a painting or a photograph, which are susceptible to change). A screen, with its oppressive obsolescence, is far more resistant to the slow erosion of time and the proliferation of images promises a seeming eternity, banal and deceptive.

Seeing by the sea

These are the thoughts that came to me in lockdown, in between the video calls and online projects that replaced my usual visits to the studio. From my flat in the landlocked city of Seville came the idea for a new artistic project titled [Nada que ver](#), alongside the firm decision to move by the sea as soon as possible.

[TRANSLATORS' NOTE: *Nada que ver* translates as both “nothing to see” and “nothing to do with” as in, X has nothing to do with Y; it is something completely different.]

But first I needed to finish a half-completed painting that I had been copying from its original in my city's Fine Arts museum when the pandemic broke out. It was an oil painting by Rafael Martínez Díaz, titled *Escena de familia* (Family scene) and painted in 1954, when Spain was still being ravished by the hunger and scarcity of the post-war period. It is also known as *Niñas pobres* (Poor girls).



Figure 5: Escena de familia (Martínez Díaz 1954)

For several years I had been captivated by the domestic desolation in which the four young girls in the painting are depicted. In a way, they provoked in me an uneasiness similar to that of "my" sculpture of a helpless girl, as well as the sense of grief I felt in confinement. In August 2020, I was able to resume my work at the museum. There were hardly any visitors, so I was allowed to work full time. The intensity of the effort that I put in was no doubt related to the strange circumstances. Everything seemed extreme. The copy underwent considerable changes, especially in the confines of the scene: the window and the view. After such an intense period of isolation at home, this domestic "Family Scene" around the table had acquired other meanings.

Once the work in the museum was finished, I moved with my son to the outskirts of a coastal town in Cádiz and began to develop my new project here.

There are no shops or neighbours where we live, but we can see the beach from our windows and the sound of the waves accompanies our days. I have set up a workspace in the living room and given up on the idea of renting a studio outside the house because of what might happen. The shrinking of our lives to domestic and virtual space has been balanced somewhat by the beloved horizon, a line which is at once a place of union with Nature and the contour of our own limitations. Living in a place of immutable desolation demands an abandonment of the self. Nothing will ever be the same again, even if the rolling of the waves seems constant. Placed in this limiting situation, we see *all our things* mutate; sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. There are no certainties. In a kind of abandonment, our vulnerability remains expectant and open to any possibility. Sometimes someone passes by, windsurfing or skysurfing.

This is how we live now. This liminal situation, with its unaccustomed uncertainty, forces us to wait, placates us and tempers us as never before.

[Video artwork: ORILLA I \(SHORE I\)](#) (Jiménez Muñoz 2020c)



Figure 6: Detail of my copy of Escena de familia (Jiménez Muñoz 2020b)

Video artwork: 'ORILLA II' (SHORE II) (Jiménez Muñoz 2020d)



Figure 7: Orilla II (Jiménez Muñoz 2020d)

We have become voyeurs of our greatest "failure" - uncertainty.

Just like after the war, just like in the *Escena de familia* painting, the domestic world to which women have historically been relegated is the most faithful reflection of poverty, absence, despondency and, at the same time, the safest refuge. I began to "remove" from the painting its least mutable parts: the table, the jug, the plate, the "stage", the home of that family that perished (the girls, their food...). I then brought this scene to the sea. As in all catastrophes, a strange setting was exposed to the slow change of nature. For the last piece in this exhibition, I shot another video in an attempt to represent the helplessness and desolation of our homes, sometimes inhabited by just a single, solitary diner:



Figure 8: All that remains (Jiménez Muñoz 2020a)

[Video artwork: ORILLA III \(SHORE III\)](#) (Jiménez Muñoz 2020e)



Figure 9: Still from Orilla III (Jiménez Muñoz 2020e)

List of Illustrations and Artworks

- Jiménez Muñoz, C. (2006). [photograph]. *The boy*. Artist's own private collection.
- (2019a). [oil painting]. *Mar I*. Exhibited Camas: Sala Nuevo Ateneo. Oil, resin and sand on canvas. 195x195.
- (2019b). [photograph]. *Photographic Memory*. Artist's own private collection.
- (2019c). [photograph]. View of exhibition *Lo insondable*. Artist's own private collection.
- (2020a). [photograph]. *All that remains*. Artist's own private collection.
- (2020b). [photograph]. Detail of my copy of *Escena de familia*. Artist's own private collection.
- (2020c). [online video]. *Orilla I*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/w9yB2IRV2rM>
- (2020d). [online video]. *Orilla II*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8LI60WOG0Q&t=87sist's>
- (2020e) [online video]. *Orilla III* Available at: <https://youtu.be/LMqovG0I-HA>
- Martínez Díaz, M. (1954). [oil painting]. *Escena de familia*. Sevilla: Bellas Artes. Oil on canvas. 130x195.
Artist's own photograph.

About Concha

Concha Jiménez was born in Seville, where she has lived much of her life and where she graduated in Fine Arts in 2004 having specialised in Printmaking and Graphic Design. Although her interests range from installation to photography, poetry, literature, sculpture and illustration, her main focus has always been (and remains) painting.

While her early works stand out for their expressiveness (especially in portraits), in recent years she has taken a more austere, conscious and contained direction in which a strong personal involvement is still present.

She belongs to UAVA (Union of Visual Artists of Andalusia), and MAV (Association of Women in Visual Arts).



Concha's upcoming solo exhibition, *NADA QUE VER*, will take place at the Sala Alfonso X in El Puerto de Santa María (Cádiz, Spain), from 7th-28th August, 2021

You can find out more about Concha and her work on [her website](#) or send her an email at conchajimenezmunoz@gmail.com

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