

On Clay & Transitional Spaces: Vanessa Donoso Lopez at Kevin Kavanagh Sue Rainsford

In *Texture Notes*, poet and performer Sawako Nakayasu writes

‘The pain of seeing something beautiful.

Is layered as such, the first layer of it being thick, of substance, I can’t say which sort, but of being matter and matterful.’

Nakayasu provides us with a lexicon of sorts for Vanessa Donoso López’s work: the physical processes and corporeal consequences of ‘being matter and matterful’ that suffuse our every perceptive act. Indebted to the earth and entirely invested in material and cross-cultural contact, her work begins at the very tributary stages of perception where touch is still tightly braided with its sibling senses.

At times so implicit as to be imperceptible but unfolding nonetheless, this matter of fact connectivity breaches the spatial and temporal distance between bodies and earth, between bodies and bodies.

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Clay is Donoso López’s primary medium, and this exhibition continues her easy familiarity and ongoing personal relationship with it as substance and material. Travelling to personally resonant sites to source the clay she will later mix with ink and fire as sculpture, her work envelopes the contingent properties of a given patch of earth and the clay it produces (in this instance Alanís de la Sierra in Sevilla, Utrilla in the Soria province, as well Camallera, Girona in Catalunya, where the artist herself was born). The pieces are subsequently rich with environmental contingencies; the reactive relationship between altitude, density and temperature that have informed the soil’s palette and texture.

As a medium, clay is responsive and malleable, eager to take form – bearing its marks instantly and so speaking to a tight, gestural present moment. Donoso López is also keenly aware, however, that its history as a natural material reaches back to 24,000BC and connects us texturally to prehistoric humans. Through clay, we are not only linked to the earliest instances of moulding an object into shape, but to the first narrative inscription. It is this inaugural piece of literature, the epic of Gilgamesh written in 2100BC, that Donoso López has returned to for this current exhibition. In a series of expressive clay objects and drawings, she has distilled her own conclusions around its core events and characters.

Initially transcribed in Sumerian on 12 clay tablets, the material link between Gilgamesh and its birthing substance is further compounded in this exhibition. It is also fitting that this most pliable of mediums is paired with a piece of fictive narrative that, having undergone countless translations, exists now as a series of conflicting versions. Donoso López’s interpretations are straightforwardly depictive. In both drawing and sculpture, the characters regard us with uniform expressions; we see Gilgamesh, known to be a cruel king, exert his authority with a brute physicality. We see Utnapishtim and his wife – depicted alongside the animals they ushered onto the ark – who

Gilgamesh approaches in his search for the youth restoring flower. The flower itself is portrayed as a simple floral substance without reference to its potential magical attributes.

Concurrent with this literal quality, however, is a marked blend of textual interpretation and *embodied* experience, the substantive crux of the work being the clay retrieved from the three sites across Spain. Integral to how they function in the gallery is the extended movement through space their making entailed, a repeated transitioning across borders geographical and political. Now directly embodying these locations, the works are rich with incidental detail and haptic content, with close and recurring contact: the viewer's experience, though primarily ocular, is tangibly charged with the artist's travels, with each micro-instance of petrichor in the studio as the clay, upon being wettened to be mixed with ink, releases a rain-rich scent.

Considering a detail of a drawing in her studio – the speckled haunch of a slumping, four-legged creature – Donoso López tells me that once clay and ink have been mixed and applied to paper, a controlled instance of chaos begins to unfold. These moments see foreign elements entered into close contact where material integration – to varying degrees – ensues, and speaks to an enduring theme in her practice: charged cultural exchange induced within a tight, frictive space. Once induced, such a process loosens the criteria for commonality, but also recuperates connectivity as a shared experience of factors contingent and causal.

On a larger scale, Donoso López describes her exhibition process as ‘making 3D installations inside a transitional space’. Each exhibition, then, is an intermediate zone where two established environments bleed into and feed one another, forging a space inside which a more integrated participation can unfold. This is not for the sake of assimilation, but to test what one substance might lend to another: in this instance, the space of the gallery and the range of sites across Spain.

Witnessing two foreign bodies converge, there is much to be learned in what endures, what falls away, and what serves to suffuse and transform.

Architect Juhani Pallasmaa links our contemporary state of alienation – a condition that reaches into our every encounter – to The Renaissance system of the senses. Once metaphorically entwined with the cosmic body, the senses became hierarchical: sight was foregrounded for its close ties to insight and enlightenment, and touch degraded for its carnal implications, for its tight correspondence with dust and dirt; the earth.

Our dismissal of that sensory mode which ‘integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves’, Pallasmaa writes, sees us dispensed of vital fruits. Such fruit is what Donoso López examines, the fruits of dealing in what is ‘matter, matterful’.

Works cited
Sawako Nakayasu: *Texture Notes*
Juhani Pallasmaa: *The eyes of the skin: architecture and the senses*

Sue Rainsford is a writer and researcher based in Dublin. She is the recipient of the VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2016/17, and is currently in residence at the Irish Museum of Modern Art as part of The Freud Project (2016-2021). Her novel, *Follow Me To Ground*, is forthcoming with New Island Books in May 2018.