

mnemonic landscapes

Gabriela Aceves lives in exile. More accurately, she lives in *self-exile*. The idea of self-exile carries many levels of meaning referring not only to a chosen displacement from one's home land and culture, but within this, a displacement from a certain sense of self. Not an uncommon state of being in our postmodern condition, self-exile results from a frictional interaction between the cultural codes and histories that frame us, and a relentlessly restless subjectivity. What keeps this state of being within the realm of exile, rather than embracing the notion of travel for example, is a sustained relation of acute longing toward one's home of origin.

To live in self-exile means to always be estranged both from one's supposed origin and one's present cultural environment. Why would someone go through such a painful process given the option to return home and renew what has been missed? For Aceves, her prolonged absence from Mexico is characterized less by a loss than by an enabling sense of estrangement. A sense of distance, however uncomfortable, that allows for a conscientious sense of being in the world. Self-exile becomes a productive anxiety and awareness of how one both sees and is seen in relation to individuals, specific cultures and histories. For Aceves the condition of exile is performative, a space from which to enact a search procedure for the locations of self.

In *mnemonic landscapes*, Aceves explores the representation of idealized but palpable memories of a homeland. She takes as her subject a landmark in central Mexico, an ancient valley that runs between two volcanoes, a landscape that has, in a sense, witnessed the entire cultural history of Mexico. Over centuries the mythology of this site has inspired a wealth of visual representations. Aceves creates and juxtaposes two impressions of this landscape, one from memory and one from documentation of a recent trip. The first "image" is played out through a constructed twenty-foot corridor where on each of its facing walls is a contour drawing resembling the shape of each volcano. Walking through the hall between the drawings, one finds the subtle line is actually made of human hair, hair that has been sewn and imbedded into the surface of the walls. The second work is an edited video projection that documents a movement through the actual landscape of the valley. Accompanying this work is an ambient soundscape of the valley, captured while producing the video, and played so that it can be heard throughout the space of the exhibition.

What makes these landscapes not just images of any land is the very history and memory they are imbued with. Land takes on a sense of place because people have been there and formed a relationship to it. Aceves' landscapes present this place to us as a search is carried out. A search to find her relationship to such a place, how it has a living memory within her and how her sense of that space might inform the way she experiences the rest of the world. What we don't see are the specifics of the culture that has lived in this place. What we are given to see is a performance of sensing place, the sensation of remembering, return, and further recollection of place as an embodied, kinetic and multi-sensory experience.

Meaning in *mnemonic landscapes* remains open and its production perhaps ongoing as what we are invited to witness is not just landscape as mnemonic device, but memory as representation. Of course, all forms of representation are in a sense based on memory (a re-presentation), but it is possible that the creation and perception of representation is itself a process of memory formation. Writer Andreas Huyssen understands the relation between representation and memory as not so much linear as it is woven together:

... rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory ... is itself based on representation. *The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory.* The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable.ⁱ [my emphasis]

In the search procedure for a sense of self, the stories we tell, the memories we recount, the pictures we paint, are a part of living life. It is not that we start with clear knowledge of who we are but rather that the very telling, the articulation through forms of representation, is itself a process through which an understanding of oneself might be formed.

As a woman in self-exile, Aceves' installation is articulated from a space of *in between*. In between cultures, in between spaces that seem like home. Like the in between of walking within Aceves' corridor with a body's lived history cracking the walls around us, or like the seeming immediacy of the sound of wind passing our ears while viewing her nostalgia textured video montage. There is a fissure that opens at the faultline of these layers, layers articulated by a multi-centered self. But the fissure in Aceves' work is optimistic. As poet/philosopher Leonard Cohen teaches, "cracks are where the light gets in," and these mnemonic landscapes show the displacement of self-exile as a space of productive longing, a space of invention.

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ⁱ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), P.3.

Gabriela Aceves is a Mexican artist based in Kitchener, Ontario. Her work has been exhibited across Mexico as well as in Chile and Canada.

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