

REMEMBER SAMMY JANKIS

Matando el Rato - Eileen Noy

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I saw Eileen inside one of the installations on display, barefoot, moving the ground with her hands, while setting up the show *Matando el Rato* at Fondazione Morra Greco. For Eileen, I realized setting up *Cenizas del Dia Después* meant stepping once again inside the work.

A keen connection through bodily sensations seems to be at the center of the functioning, the genesis, the production, the life of Eileen's works, and the relationship they have with viewers. It is clear to me that all senses are involved in her works, including impressions stored in memories and memory, now that Eileen Noy's exhibition at the Foundation is almost open to the public.

The artist's body is, in this sense, embedded in the material and expressive component of her works, installations, photographs or drawings, starting with *Homeless*, 2020, one of the first pieces visible to those visiting the exhibition by the walking tour. It is a site-specific intervention realized by Eileen in the countryside of Cuba, in particular of Camagüey, the town of her birth where part of her family still lives.

Projected against the backdrop of the Cuban countryside, *Homeless* is a work realized during Covid that, by summarizing the uncertainty of a moment of transition experienced on a global level, more universally narrates the delicate and transitory link with life as we know it in its habits and certitudes, impersonating it in the idea of the "hut" as a more complex and articulated form of kinship between individual, place, nature of course, and a sense of belonging and hospitality. This simple yet significant image in Eileen's practice introduces themes and reflections that develop in different but coherent ways throughout the works on show.

Although it arises from circumstances dictated by an identified moment in the course of recent history, *Homeless* might be considered a helpful passe-partout of reading the trajectory of the artist's work: looking at the hut in the terrain, and yet from a distance, as estranged from the scene to reconstruct the surrounding context, the precarious accommodation this hut stands for defines the unstable boundaries of a temporary landscape. "We will wander in a wandering world; we pursue pilgrimage and freedom, and it is in that place where we forget the little things. The permanence of our home, our habitat", writes Eileen.

The photograph documenting the intervention formalizes on natural wood panels. Eileen tells me that the smell of the wood interests her; the connection and synaesthetic

appeal of the wild grass in the photo with the raw vividness of the panels' texture motivated the intervention's formalization.

Following a reversal of perspective, *Cenizas del Día Después*, 2019, positioned in one of the central halls of the exhibition floor, is a field of ploughed earth with *raspadura*.

Raspadura or *panela* is a candy obtained by drying, boiling, and evaporating cane sugar. The action of "fertilizing" a small segment of productive soil with raspadura, letting the product ripen on the ground until it rots, impregnating the environment with a strong smell, visually recalls the image of sugar cane fields, the preparation of which is done by burning the soil and leaving the ash on the surface.

Like a field of possibilities but also a dead end, the earth's box and raspadura that makes up Eileen Noy's installation implies a space of historical and symbolic, as well as political and eco-political, encounters, in which Cuba's economic and geopolitical positioning has continually renegotiated its role, as has the country's life and economy, right down to the fate of the companies and families that, from the enslaved people brought in during colonial times to more recent periods, have lived in communion or overpowered to the work of the land. In this same "frame" and field of forces at work, the image and a sense of identity of familiarity for the artist, the link of working the land with the history and work of his parents on the family's country estate in Minas, is countered.

The action of bringing back the ashes of consumption and the exploitation of the soil within the soil itself, summarized on the one hand by the clods of virgin earth and, on the other, by the "sowing" of the paneta purchased as a finished product, somehow "contaminates" the original chain of the cane sugar production process. By tampering with its state through waste and the extreme exploitation of resources, in this case of the raspadura crushed on top of the soil, the symbolic image of a history that repeats, contradicts and deteriorates itself is set in motion by Eileen as an abstract agent of an ideal rather than chemical, historical, or agricultural process. Seamlessly rewinding its destiny, *Cenizas del Día Después* adumbrates the superimposition of the future on the past, the reflection of new generations on the legacy of previous ones.

I asked Eileen if she had ever felt betrayed by her country. If the need to leave, the fact that she now lives far from where she was born and where her family is, while her brother lives and works in the United States, has not broken a bond of trust and an emotional one with Cuba.

Her practice and vision as an artist remain strongly linked, especially in the works on show at the Fondazione Morra Greco, to landscapes and features of the place where she grew up and lived for more than half her life. But when Eileen talks to me about herself, her research, and what she has done so far, she tells me that she has always nurtured the desire to leave Cuba, feeling constrained within mechanisms and grids that did not belong to her.

Its narrative resonates with that of one, or perhaps more, generations with entirely different histories, stories and experiences so that it would be utterly contradictory to

try to create a homogeneous narrative that classifies their aspirations, desires, and even drift or tensions.

This tendency is perhaps one that stitches together multiple temporalities and references, blurring the planes of vision and even of experience, living through categories that we are inclined to call “traditional” or deriving from tradition.

Putting aside for the moment which tradition, should it still matter, I am referring even before stereotypes and their attribution, to images: that of the sugar, the earthen field, the *taurete* chair, the touches of *marabou* coal, in which Eileen too is led to recognise herself. Perhaps this is a peculiarity – if we have to find one – of this generation: that of playing without too much fear at a certain safe distance – to the point of being reassuring, in fact – with images and stereotypes, either completely impersonal or already idealized and sublimated, with an observation spirit that stands at a distance, estranged or filtered beyond nostalgia, almost in the nostalgia of not being nostalgic, of not having experienced a history that never belonged to them personally, but to that of their mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers.

“The word *raspadura* in today’s Cuban context has broadened its meaning considerably, the popular slang has turned it into a symbol of the needs of society. Little by little in the public imagination, we have become an empire of *raspadura*, where surviving on a daily basis is the only option, given that there is no way to plan the economy in the long term with total certainty that it will be effective. Hence, a mulch of ground scratch (tradition) covers the virgin soil like a veil, in an effort to fertilize it for what is to come.”

The recurrence of time, once again connected to the idea of an intersection between different planes of experience and lived experience, returns in *Matando el Rato*, an installation composed of mixed media from 2022.

Conceived expressly for the exhibition at Fondazione Morra Greco during Eileen’s residency in Naples, *Matando el Rato* stems from the observation of the custom among the inhabitants of Camagüey of spending the afternoon hours chatting outside the patios of their houses, sitting on chairs left in the street each night to wait for the next day’s *matare el rato*.

Posing once again as witness and observer, the artist records and returns an interiorised moment from her experience, partly personal and partly “inherited” from the customs of generations before hers.

Taurete is the name of the high-backed wooden and leather chair of Spanish import naturalized over time within the urban landscapes and streets of the island of Cuba from which the artist drew inspiration for the sculptural part of the installation.

Empty, as if deprived of its function, at first convivial, then domestic, synonymous with human presence, the *taurete* rests against the wall as is customary among the observants of this ritual when they use it to doze.

Paisaje a Destiempo is a 2019 video installation specially adapted for the exhibition in the Foundation’s spaces. The “Landscapes” of “*destiempo*”, which we would translate as “out

of time”, not in sync, are the natural ones of the island of Cuba and the rural village of Minas in Camagüey, where the artist was born, that is, of everyday life lived by people. The artist brings into the exhibition space the *marabou*, an invasive plant imported to Cuba from Africa, which today characterises much of the island’s landscape and the compassionate life of Minas.

In the original 2019 installation, the marabou - now endemic to Cuba, whose many uses and characteristics are widely exploited for export, of which charcoal is one of the main ones - had been brought into the gallery in the form of plants and shrubs, precisely like those that characterize the fields on the sidewalks in Minas that the artist has internalized as a familiar landscape and identity figure, despite its distant origin. The marabou is presented here in the already ‘processed’ form of charcoal in today’s exhibition.

Parallel to the identity figure, conflicting and layered at the same time as the sugar, and to some extent also the taurete, the marabou enters the work as a significant element, charged with political and economic motives, which the artist activates as “identity”. Hence, its epistemology inserts within another landscape, the “asynchronous” or “timeless” one, in opposition to a globalized modernity staying outside the island of Cuba, which corresponds to the flow of everyday life in the social context of Minas, i.e. to the monotony of every day as parallel and mirror-like to that of the landscape characterized by large uniform expanses of marabou.

As Eileen explains to me, marabou has, in fact, partly replaced sugar in its economic and industrial role. In contrast, a changing global and political landscape, including the hyper-productive and consumerist landscape of art, is contrasted by the immutable, almost inert sluggishness of a ‘family-run’ economy.

The observation of the social and urban, rural and economic landscape, together with their interaction, are the dynamics behind other works in the exhibition that oscillate by changing the point of observation but not the methodology and operation, starting from an impression, physical and sensitive, always linked to a memory, or to a re-elaboration filtered through a subjective positioning, anchored once again in a bodily perception imprinted in the artist’s memory: the visual impression of the uniform expanses of marabou becomes the starting point for a broader reflection.

Windows Shopping, 2019, is a self-timer of the artist photographing her reflection in the window of the prestigious five-star Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski in the heart of Havana. Through a play of light and transparency, the artist’s silhouette in the foreground appears framed by a pearl necklace. In the background, the reflection of the city’s decaying buildings gives a counter-scape to the reality surrounding ‘The Home of Cuban Luxury’, this luxurious tourist settlement that landed in the old town in 2017.

Something similar happens in the video *Memento*, 2020, which is in the same room as Eileen’s self-timer: alternating scenes from Christopher Nolan’s film of the same name - *Memento*, about the figure of Sammy Jankis - and a film shot by Eileen Noy in the

streets of Havana, in front of the same Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski as the photograph, follow one another in the space of a few minutes.

An off-screen voice that we understand to be that of a character struggling with amnesia tells us he talks to himself to remember what he forgets by writing notes. When we have something important to remember, he informs us that the only way not to forget is to note it on one's body.

Sammy Jankis is a character without discipline and routine who knows no way of remembering what his loss of memory every two minutes following an accident causes him to forget. Sammy can't learn anything.

But there is a way for Sammy to learn something: a series of tests with electrified objects that prove that learning in a condition of amnesia is possible, if not by knowledge by instinct.

Sammy Jankis' inability to learn by instinct is enough to conclude that it is a psychological reason, not a physical one, that places Sammy Jankis in that condition.

Who is Sammy Jankis?

Perhaps the imperviousness of particular places and realities to pre-established canons and well-defined disciplines beyond their physical, geographical, or geopolitical location, from the insularity of Havana to the abusive connections of three families to Sky and digital terrestrial cables in the streets, the illegal and out-of-control constructions in the suburbs, the parallel economies of illicit commercial activities in the lowlands, to the out-of-control televotes at Sanremo Festival in Italy.

A necessary coexistence with these rules leads to forced cooperation, the title of another video work in the exhibition in which two people, including the artist, clash under the weight of a wooden yoke to lead each other's movement in problematic cooperation, a metaphor once again taken from country life to narrate social and political, but also interpersonal and intimate dynamics at work in everyday life as well as in much broader history.

Who is Sammy Jankis? Who are we? What determines our identity?

The memory perhaps of a tradition, the attachment to a place or the designation of our roots? Or their eradication from our personal histories?

Remember Sammy Jankis.