

# Manuel Vilariño Tectonic

CENTRO GALEGO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEA  
Santiago de Compostela

Curated by Alberto Ruiz de Samaniego

Opening: 19th March at 8 pm  
From 19th March to 21th June 2015  
Hall, Ground floor, Double Space

# Manuel Vilariño Tectonic

*Tectónica [Tectonic]* is not just another exhibition by Manuel Vilariño (A Coruña, 1952). What we are dealing with here is an exploration of the author's creative and poetic universe, but from a standpoint that allows us to approach his work from a completely new angle or perspective. It is effectively about allowing the possibility of a *tectonic* work, in a metaphorical use of the term, that is, to explore and highlight the supporting lines that underlie his aesthetic thinking and which explain, in the form of a continuous stimulus and a counterpoint, all the plastic and poetic work—the very life experience—of this highly distinctive creator. This exhibition aims to seek out those places which harbour the silence or the original wonder of the creative act, as well as the splendour of the images, right there where they glimmer for perhaps the first time.

The exhibition has been conceived on the basis of four thematic and formal lines: Music, Poetry, Science and Image. In each of these strata of sensitive experience it will be possible to contemplate a series of fundamental references throughout Manuel Vilariño's career, at the same time as his aesthetic universe is contextualised and explained, not only with examples of his work, but also through the presence of his voice, his objects and readings, his journeys and as his cultural, musical and knowledge-based references.

Now we know, *the lesson of the things that happen* is the lesson that Manuel Vilariño has always been showing us. Through his verses or his immemorial, archetypal images, which range from the most elemental reality (a nest, a volcanic rock, a charred piece of wood, the flight of a bird, the shadow of a wing) to the broadest and most immersive visual languages (a mountain rising out of the mist, the ocean as a metaphor for an unbounded space of energy), that which the artist has been pursuing throughout an already highly extensive work process is, so to speak, the inexhaustible, voracious dream of the flame of life. Its passing or its combustion in the midst of a continuous process of generation and loss. The metaphysical game, too,

which is made up of absence, promise, subtraction and rebirth or germination.

Vilariño's photographs and words have always sought to show or conjure up what religious treatises have referred to as the *numinous*. "The numinous, wrote Mircea Eliade in *Lo sagrado y lo profano [The sacred and the profane]*, is identified as something that is *ganz andere*, something radical and totally different: it seems like nothing human or cosmic; confronted with it, man experiences the feeling of his nullification, of 'being merely a creature', expressed in the words of Abraham to the Lord, of being merely 'ashes and dust' (*Genesis, XVIII, 27*)." Thus, the photograph captures the radiant black heat which leaves its zoological imprint in the form of a dangerous marking. What Vilariño's image captures is the fascinating tremor of an existence which flows and disappears, like a pathway of lichen does in the thicket where, in the distance, a bird sings. Poetry and image emanate from this twilight enclosure which is, at the same time, initiatory: initial. In the refuge, nest, cell or lair earmarked for the darkest, most penetrating metamorphoses. Hence, all the tension from the poetic act is traced, as the poet constantly read by Vilariño, J.A. Valente, had already suggested, in the distance between the bird and the net, or between its song and its nest or cage.

This is the dance, the music, the eager, even anxious *ritornello* of existence. Like the skull and *tabla bwa*, like the fire or turmeric, the horse's mane or, most strikingly, the copper in which in this exhibition the artist has worked for the first time the material is merely a setting for the cracks and their brilliant dance. The surface of a crackle where the flashing of the colour denotes the enumeration of very different earths, lights, fluctuations and tensions. The indefatigable energy of the earth and life, of death



Manuel Vilariño: *Tesoiras*, 1983

© Manuel Vilariño, VEGAP, Santiago de Compostela, 2015



Manuel Vilariño: *Abada*, 2010. © Manuel Vilariño, VEGAP, Santiago de Compostela, 2015

and the opening in its base. Here in its alchemical depths, where everything appears to be consumed, as everything is, in the end, regenerated.

To approach or feel these depths undoubtedly induces bewitchment and dizziness, confusion and disorientation. Hence the need to attempt to establish a fixed point, a focus where vision is possible. That is the place of the song, there where, for example, the song of the bird emerges. Exultant melody of life, integrated at the same time agonisingly in the depths of nature. The point of contemplation which is the poetic act itself or, to quote the poet, Wallace Stevens, also present in this exhibition: poetry as the “the triumph of contemplation. Poetic genius chooses a strait path in which passion is calmed and calm is passionate”. A nest, a mountain, the copper posts or cylinders, all point symbolically towards this establishment of a visionary core. To the effort of establishing a centre of the earth, knowing that in order to live therein it needs to be established. These are points of poetic invocation (not only in the most common sense of the term ‘poetic’, but also in the use that the Greeks made of the same: *poiesis* as creation of the world, somewhat fittingly). Constructions, then, whose ritual orientation points towards the dimension of a space which transcends the merely profane. In this sense, the copper

cylinders the artist has installed in the lobby of the museum would seem to operate as visible, symbolic images of cosmic pillars. Thus, for example, the Kwakwiltl, a native American tribe whose customs were studied by the anthropologist Franz Boas, believe that a copper post runs through the three levels of the universe: the underworld, the earth and the heavens. Nonetheless, this work of the gods which is the universe must, in turn, be gathered and imitated on a smaller scale by humans. Only thus, through this sacred post, does the axis of the world, the *axis mundi* on which all that is real is sustained and expands, become present. On the other hand, as thresholds, all these spaces have their guardian spirits—creatures or materials which, like gods, defend them from any enemy or dark power. It is precisely on the threshold where the ceremonies and sacrifices to the guardian divinities are offered, where many cultures (Babylon, Egypt, Israel) have also set the decisive act of Judgement.

Everything in Manuel Vilariño’s work harks back to this impulsive, savage, immemorial backdrop. Original territory, pre-verbal one could say, where the wail of Ginsberg or the strains of the genesiac music of Olivier Messiaen blend with the litany-like hammering of apocalyptic descriptions from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. It transpires as if the very resonating of the tools,

like a mythological blacksmith which the photographer cherishes, corresponded with the bellowing and power of the very beasts he is portraying. Here, undoubtedly, we find the *song of the earth*. Or, better still, to say it with what the expression, once again from Wallace Steven, has summarised so well: the presence of the earth's *necessary angel*, through whose vision *you see the earth again*. This song, the very musical action of the angel, undoubtedly evokes the mythical time when the world did not yet exist or was on the point of appearing. A cosmogonic or plutonic dimension which the serpents, the mists, the landscapes of lava, the sands of elemental beaches and the volcanoes that Manuel Vilariño habitually photographs show in such a superlative, plastic form.

A vision in which the mythical mountains and the tips of the Icelandic volcanoes caress the mists and vapour that flow between their peaks and their sides. Or where the edges of the forest rub against the leaves and the tracks left by nocturnal animals. In short, in the image there are always denuded presences nestling and gleaming in the shadows. It is this vision, this fascination, which draws and paralyses the viewer's gaze, which focuses the attention of the photograph or of the walker taken, trapped, overwhelmed by the surprise of the world. It is this silence, this

darkness—darkness and silence broken or interrupted by a fluttering, a tune or a howl— which, like a bell, gives rise to the ecstasy and the horror, the astonished trembling of the spectator, of the walker in the forest. Then, just like the owl that Manuel Vilariño has on occasion portrayed (that animal bestowed with the gift of night vision), the artist witnesses the begetting of the visible in the invisible itself, the link between physics, natural life and its original principle or impetus.

That dark illumination, which is the dark night of which St John of the Cross spoke, effectively produces an abrupt, passive, unintelligible ecstasy. As if the subject were overcome by a wave as if from the other world, by a jolt and an annihilation that Vilariño's images and, often, his poems attempt to entrap and convey. Crude or faltering scenes, passages of gloom and breakdowns; settings where overwhelmed bodies or eyes finally reach the deepest night, the enigmatic, stellar night. The opening which is the depths where life is delayed and also, finally, collapses, like a creature attracted by that black radiation which emanates from the Earth itself, from its fire and its mortal vertigo.

It is that unfathomable night, which is life itself (a night that is also inhabited by the animal), which the poet, the creator, the



Manuel Vilariño: *Lejano Interior #28*, 2011. © Manuel Vilariño, VEGAP, Santiago de Compostela, 2015



Manuel Vilariño: *Ala solitaria*, 2015  
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photographer wishes to approach. He does so, as we have pointed out, with ecstasy and dread. Because even though that night also is or was himself, or lies within himself, he has, nonetheless, separated himself from it. Unnatural animal, animal still, as Nietzsche wanted, problematically non-determined, man is, when all is said and done, a technical animal. With his tools and his know-how, his disciplines of chemistry or botany, and his maps, his writing and his cameras. His readings and his walks. In truth, all that technique is also himself, the natural prolongation of himself, the externalisation, so to speak, of his skeleton and all his muscles, of his nervous system and of his imaginary.

Thus, what we appreciate in *Tectónica [Tectonic]* is the confluence of these different techniques which combine to forge a life. And more specifically, a life focused on approaching and, even more so, on endowing a *presence* to this night, this darkness which is vital and, thus, human and more than human. Through the metaphor of the bird, the song and the flight, employing, for example, figures symbolic of a timeless scope (such as the mountain, the nest, ashes, the skull, the *axis mundi* the metaphysical cell which he has fashioned for this exhibition), Manuel Vilariño unfurls a whole series of *places of presence*. Opening scenes for an essential enigma; settings of meditation and, at the same time, of man's exposure the openness of his very existence. Just like the existential cell or cage itself that the artist has installed on the outside of the CGAC building, this show is, in a certain way, *anamnestic*, as it configures the recapitulation of an entire life path (and at the same time a *memento* or an elegy *of* and *for* disappeared loved ones), it formulates a sort of tale of metaphysical and phenomenological implications of a lineage that is, in a sense, *platonian*. There is indeed something of the mythical cavern of Greek philosophy in the cell constructed by Manuel Vilariño. Perhaps knowledge and vision effectively make it possible to increase the size of the cage. Perhaps language, poetry and creation allow us to penetrate further into the cell. It may be the case that art, knowledge, music, image and poetry consist simply of this: attempting to escape from those oppressive bars that keep us prisoners in our own non-determination, in our unnaturalness.

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