

BCN

Paired histories  
Chapter 2: Memory Vague  
Karlos Gil

Exhibition: Nov 13, 2021– Jan 7, 2022

Opening: Nov 13 de 11h a 15h

Hours: Mon to Fri, from 10.30 to 7pm by appointment

*City of Illusions* is the story of the journey that Falk, its protagonist, must take to know himself. It is a physical journey that goes from the darkness of the forest from which he emerges one day, without memory, without a past, to the darkness of space, in which he loses himself at the end of the story, when he leaves on a journey back to his home, his future. In between, he will travel through unknown and hostile territory, learning from each encounter, from each experience, to discover the truth about who he is.

The novel, published by Ursula K. Le Guin in 1967, is part of the so-called Hainish cycle, which also include works such as *The Dispossessed* or *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Throughout this series, the author proposes an alternative vision of the history of a large number of worlds colonized millions of years ago by the Hain. Based on the common origin of its inhabitants, different cultures appear depending on the genetic changes they have experienced, their history, memory and traditions, and their relationship with a different environment. In each book, from the narrator's point of view, we witness the development of a plot in which the encounter between these different ways of understanding civilization allow the author to explore philosophical, political or moral issues.

In the specific case of *City of Illusions*, we witness the arrival / birth of a being that has literally emerged from darkness. The reader and the protagonist know as much about who he is, where he comes from or what his past was: nothing. At the edge of the jungle where civilization begins, he is picked up and adopted by a primitive tribe that will give him a name, Falk, teach him to speak and welcome him almost as one of their own. Among them he will spend his first years of known life, in a sort of idyllic primeval paradise, living in constant contact with nature and with limited use of technology.

The world that Falk and the Terrans who have sheltered him inhabit is dominated by the Shing, a race of doubtful origin who rule the planet. When, after a while, the protagonist must face the need to know his past, to discover who he is, he will turn to them to find out. To do this, he will leave alone on a trip through an unknown territory to Es Toch, the city of the Shing.

Throughout his journey, Falk will meet other people and other cultures and, above all, other conceptions of what it is to be a Terran or what the Shing are. What were the original inhabitants of Terra? Who is human? Who is alien? Which version of the story is the true one? Do some submit to the rest or are they defending themselves or civilizing them? And above all, what or who is Falk? Along with these questions, other related and fundamental questions appear: what role does technology play in the process of civilization or conquest? And the construction of the narrative of the past?

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Because the big question for Falk is getting to know the truth. About the world he lives in and therefore about who he is and what role he plays. Because lies and truth are confused even at the mental level: it seems that the Shing are capable of lying at the last level, even with thought, the place where the truth should be exposed. Falk will need to suffer all the experiences throughout his journey to understand that the truth is hidden within him, in his erased memory, and from there discover his past, that of his world, that of Terra and the truth about History and the Shing.

Falk's journey is physical and mental. He travels through unknown territory, while learning different versions of its history. He listens to stories, interprets the information he receives, contrasts it. His lack of memory forces him to read what he observes from a point of view in which the certainties about reality are constantly changing. The certainty is at the end of that journey.

*"Imagine darkness."*

*"Never believe the truth of anything the Enemy has said."*

Karlos Gil has used science fiction as a fundamental tool in his work, since the beginning of his career. On the one hand, he is interested in his ability to reflect and highlight the issues of the present by creating an anecdote located in another time, but he also uses it as a repertoire of objects loaded with cultural references. In both cases, Gil appreciates the metaphorical capacity of the genre.

*"...things can be hidden from even the greatest Listener."*

Through this cultural creation the artist investigates the mechanisms of narrative systems and representation and, especially, displacements in the interpretation of the symbol. In short, the issues involved in the creation, dissemination and reception of the artistic work and its relationship with the historical, social and cultural environment in which it appears.

Gil's work takes place without distinction between different disciplines, although he has paid special attention to the problems of sculpture and the use of technology in the process of artistic creation. It does so with a double value: as production resource and as a historical reference.

*"With his lone memory of a lone peak to embody the word 'mountain...'"*

His work functions more as a conjunction of coordinated projects than as a mere collection of objects. Thus, over time, he has been building an interrelated corpus in which common elements converge that nuance and enrich each other. For Karlos Gil, it is not so much about the singular expression in the creation of an isolated object as about the in-depth study, throughout a series of related works that propose an immersive and self-referential experience.

*"He saw no mountains, but that night he saw the rim of the world where it cuts across the stars."*

Paraphrasing the classics of the genre, let's use Ursula K. Le Guin's book as a guide to walk through the work of Karlos Gil. Let us consider the exhibition as a physical journey through the temporal trajectory of his work. Let us use the novel as an instruction manual and literature as a dictionary that gives us clues to get closer to the work of the plastic artist.

*"...In the darkness that faces outward from the sun a mute spirit woke... Wholly involved in chaos, he knew no pattern... He had no language, and did not know the darkness to be night..."*

Gil has been making the tapestries that make up the different chapters of the *Stay Gold* series since 2014. They are made on Jacquard-type looms, the first system to automate tapestry weaving using punch cards; a direct ancestor of the computer and of current manufacturing facilities. With this relationship of technologies we can establish a chain that, as in a family, goes from member to member backwards in time, and puts us in direct contact with the past.

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*"Falk kept gazing in his mind at the jewel that might be false and might be priceless, the story, the pattern, the glimpse -true vision or not- of the world he had lost."*

*"He now knew something that they, who had taught him everything, did not know: that a man could see his planet turn among the stars..."*

*"... 'Sun' he repeated, gazing at it, centered on it, the void and vacancy of his being filled with the light of the sun and the sound of its name. So his education began..."*

*"...Empathy was to telepathy somewhat as touch to sight, a vaguer, more primitive, and more intimate sense..."*

*"I talk and you listen. Because, of course, I am the Listener and you are the Messenger."*

*"...It was the old League tongue, Galaktika. Like all Foresters, Falk, had learned it from tapes and books, for the documents surviving from the Great Age were recorded in it, and it served as a common speech among men of different tongues..."*

The fabrics produced on Jacquard looms are characterized by their quality, their resistance and their durability. The information they contain will therefore be preserved for a long time. Gil's tapestries are metaphor-objects of the Homeric literary figure that links cloth and memory and the act of narrating to that of spinning. We say "the narrative thread" and "the thread of memory" and "lose thread." But our reading of these remains will depend on the integrity with which they reach us: the problem of the fragment and its interpretation. Archeology has spent at least 200 years trying to extrapolate the information obtained from a singular object to understand an entire civilization. Semiology has spent almost the same time trying to interpret the meanings of the sign. The fragment preserves the memory but also misleads about the past.

Gil's own visual proposal has become blurrier and more abstract over time. In the first series, we see plants (insisting once again on this link-opposition between nature and technology), in the second they are geometric shapes, patterns and in the most recent spots of color open to interpretation.

With *Second Sun*, Gil raises the possibility of reconstructing nature through technology, a classic science fiction device. The ecological dilemma of the depletion of natural resources and the human capacity to replicate them through science dates back to the origins of the genre in the 19th century. From *Frankenstein* to *The Time Machine*, we have seen the conflict that arises when knowledge threatens to turn man into a god. Here we are witnessing the paradox of manufacturing suns in series, of course more than one. Also to the horror of contemplating a world that is not ours, a world with two suns. Or to discover that there is a double of our world, a world and a sun with its *doppelgänger*s, which somehow implies the existence of our own *doppelgänger*. But even more than a forgery, it is a re-creation that introduces the natural into the exhibition space, the traditional function of art as an imitator of nature. As admired in the romantic landscapes of the 19th century, or by the pioneers of science fiction, Gil reflects on the Sublime and its impact on the viewer.

According to the RAE, memory is the "image or set of images of past events or situations that remain in the mind." That is, for the main dictionary of the Spanish language, human memory is built from images. We remember images, even when we remember sounds, smells, or sensations. The intangible becomes visible and, therefore, it should be feasible to capture them in another medium. Penetrating the brain is one of the oldest dreams of the technological man because, since the death of religion, that is where the soul resides. And according to certain conceptions, that has always been the role of the artist in society.

In the video series *Deep Image*, Karlos Gil has collaborated with a programmer and a neuroscientist to design artificial intelligence software that translates data emitted from an individual's cerebral cortex into shapes and colors that are projected onto a screen. The result is images, more or less clear, with readings that are sometimes very obvious and others that depend on the interpretation of the viewer. In short, they question the limits of representation and understanding of the subjective, of translation of the unconscious into the world of the real and the tangible.

Perhaps where he most deals with the problem of the sculptural object is in the *Dedalus Overdrive* series, a collection of car ornaments from the 1920s decontextualized from their original environment and function to be individualized as works of art. Gil has purchased these ornaments in different parts of the world, extracted from the car hood they once flagged, like figureheads of a ship, and that are now peeled off in the junkyards.

They all share similar forms that emphasize the idea of speed associated with modernity and progress. But at the same time, stylistically and thematically, they are reminiscent of antiquity, as is highlighted by the name of the series, which refers to the myth of the man who built wings to be able to fly. A sort of past-future or futuristic antiquity that ultimately is what they are, antiques, exhibited in the museum in the same way as is done with the Cycladic sculptures, fixed on their plinth.

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And they also, are no longer capable of movement. They are there, condemned to hieraticism, anchored in the exhibition hall, stripped of their original meaning. Just as Icarus died abruptly from the sky when his ambition caused his mechanical wings to melt, these figurines grieve the sins of technology standing for eternity.

*"Between thought and spoken word is a gap where intention can enter, the symbol be twisted aside, and the lie come to be."*

*Redundancy (de-extinction).* If we consider that archeology studies the physical remains of the past in order to know it, what will be the objects of our time that will remain for the archaeologists of tomorrow? Almost from the first image of the future that we have culturally conceived, the neon sign is an omnipresent element. From *Metropolis* to *Alphaville* or *Blade Runner*, the imaginary cities of the future are lined with those lines of light that combine all the qualities associated with modernity: technology, electricity, color. Even looking at a black and white photograph from more than 100 years ago, these elements still seem advanced to us, also to our self today, and, of course, more than the cars that pass underneath and that reflect them in their old-fashioned bodies.

*"He knew still better now how empty and mysterious a world men inhabited in these later days of their history."*

Neon was invented in 1910 and its use spread rapidly through Western cities at the same time that industrialization processes were culminating. By the time its use declines, so will that of the technology-based ideal of endless progress. It is not surprising that the life of neon in the city fully coincides with the golden age of science fiction and that, when its decline begins, the inexorability of dystopia is fully established.

Ironically, neon, which is so durable, has practically disappeared from our streets, replaced by LEDs, colder and without poetry. Cheaper. In several cities neon cemeteries have been established, where the remains of these luminous posters are piled up, already prepared for an archeology of the future that is now. Our future is already past. Our future is nostalgia.

*"Old scraps of information may always come in handy."*

But neon is not only a communication channel but also a language. Advertising, another of contemporary world phenomena, developed in the 20th century its own code of signs. Our archaeologist of the future will have to face giant dumps of electrified rosetta stones.

*"And how will I recognize what I seek when I find it?"*

In various moments of his work, as in *Phantom Limbs*, Gil approaches the problem of the creation of the sculptural object from an ironic, almost cynical perspective, especially in relation to certain conventions of contemporary creation. In this case his approach to the object is made from the absence of it, in the others, in his mark.

The sculpture is built with the materials that are usually discarded in mechanized production: the one used to make the mold. We do not have the object itself but another that has appeared during the creation process. What is missing is what is there, and what is there is what is not, something that is also emphasized by distorting the limits of interpretation. The spectator's perception taken to the extreme, in an exercise from which only the artist's unaffordable will to bet on formal beauty is saved.

*"he was afraid and repelled by the alien, the monstrous, the inexplicable."*

Faced with the romantic imaginary or the questioning of the mythologized post-war avant-garde movements, Gil opts for provocation with the use of industrial materials. Foams, polymers of industrial origin, wood pulp, abominations within the natural purity of art. Unknown textures, delicate surfaces, millenary durations. Like the environment from which they come, that of industrial creation, they constitute a collection of anathemas against the traditional consideration of the artistic object that culminate in a final challenge for the artist: the fierce defense of the Beautiful.

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Karlos Gil studied at the School of Visuals Arts in New York and at the faculties of Fine Arts in Lisbon and Madrid where he earned his PhD in 2016. He has had numerous international exhibitions at such venues as Galeria Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo; Centre Pompidou, Paris; HKW, Berlin; Witte de With, Rotterdam; NTU CCA, Singapore, Gasworks, London; Fondazione Baruchello, Rome; CRAC-Montbeliard; MARCO, Vigo; CA2M, Madrid. He has participated in III Moscow International Biennale (2012) and Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria) in 2020.

Joaquín García Martín was born in Madrid and studies Art History at the UCM.

He has been part of the DOMÉSTICO collective from 2000 to 2008.

As a manager, he has collaborated with a large number of contemporary art institutions, both public and private.

In 2012 he founded garcía | galería that will run until its closure in 2020.

He is currently conducting the series of podcasts of interviews with current Spanish creators "*Hablar normal y corriente* for Editoril Caniche.

Recently curated the exhibition *Cuestión de Ambiente* at CentroCentro, Madrid.

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