

**TATIANA ABELLÁN**  
***A perpetuidad***

Curated by Juan Francisco Rueda

December 22nd 2022 - January 27th 2023

*A perpetuidad* is a way to present the retrospective work that Tatiana Abellán has been developing since 2012 and that can best be described as the material alteration of old photographs which become semantically manipulated and allow her to operate in different interdependent registers. The fragile certainty of both life and memory is on occasions built by vestiges of the past as in a photograph: the analysis of the otherness and fabulation —the fictional tales we project— by comparing these images. By carrying out a subtle and rigorous metaphotographic exercise with respect to the history of this media the review and exploration of the elements and notions that form part of this discipline become totally relevant to our contemporaneity.

It is interesting to observe how in her two latest projects, *A perpetuidad* and *Recibo la tuya* on show for the first time in this exhibition, the artist moves away from the photographic image and examines a different kind of memory stemming from the word, be it carved on tombstones or contained in an epistolary exchange of hundreds of handwritten letters from Doña Elvira Sánchez de la Orden Castrillo de Cavia between 1896 and 1902 to her betrothed, Juan Peris Masip. This new change in direction became a decade-long period of creation and reflection on photography. Disintegration of the image in the later projects has obviously made possible the recovery of many earlier projects where their ephemeral and precarious state had been affected by the material dissolution of the photographic images.

Tatiana's lyricism is a heartfelt homage to the history of photography and its first steps in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when it was moving on the boundaries of technology, curiosity, invention and magic or, thanks to its initial alchemy, echoes of chalcography. Her lyricism is not a mere homage, exclusively focussed on the field of paraphrase, borrowing, dialogue, quotation, copying or iconotropy. The artist concentrates her thoughts on essential photographic questions that appropriately reveal an eternal preoccupation with existence, the fragility of life, remembering and forgetting. Thus, neither the materials nor the techniques used are gratuitously chosen. In the case of *Cinerarias* (2014) for example, the series of ferrotypes used refer to the primitive metallic plates of the first photographs: a pewter alloy of zinc, lead and tin. In fact, the first photograph ever was taken on this medium by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. The origins of photography were fraught with the problem of fixing the image to the surface where, potentially, the desired image would be recorded. However, paradoxically, this record disappeared progressively and quickly leaving only ephemeral and spectral images that Abellán has affixed firmly to her work. Photography has a crucial mission in the fight against the finiteness or extinction of the iconic, a race against time to save this species of the subject's double. Abellán's poetry throbs with this concern, this conflict between existence and disappearance, forgetting and remembering, the tangible and intangible, between dawn and dusk.

The *Cinerarias* ferrotypes are an example of the process developed in the mid-1800s and consist of a sole direct-positive image, in the manner of the daguerrotypes created by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre but made on polished copper. Abellán's ferrotypes introduce us to the systematic work done with archive material and specifically with old recovered photography. In *Cinerarias* the iron plates are heated on a fire and despite the soot and abrasions, the image

remains latent apparently for ever. We must mention here that in 1840 William Henry Fox Talbot, another of the fathers of photography, called his calotypes "latent images". These, together with the advances made by Hippolyte Bayard would solve the difficulty, or impossibility, of making multiple paper copies of the photographic image.

The use of glass in *La imagen que resta* (2019) was not fortuitous either. This must inevitably bring to mind the ambrotypes and albumin covered glass negatives which were much more accurate. However, Abellán not only uses materials in her conversation with history, The semantic dimension is all-important. One of the virtues of her work is to bring meaning through the economy and diversity of the materials. As we can observe, the old photographs transferred to the glass show low to medium grade definition, eroded by time and abraded by the artist. Once again the register hesitates —or struggles— between disappearance and persistence. Glass transmits to us the fragility and precariousness of life, always threatened by its own end, shattered into pieces. In this exhibition *La imagen que resta* is placed in a discourse with *Encarnados* (2012-2019), a group of photographs documenting the burns inflicted by cristal negative plates of old photographs and developed on the artist's own skin by using ultraviolet light. The iconic fragility of these portraits personifies the fragility of the wounded body, inexorably fore-doomed to disappear, but still surviving, perhaps perpetually in these images of Abellán's body converted into a medium or testament to the identity of the others.

The exhibition opens with the projects *Memoria líquida* (2016) and *La niebla de la memoria* (2016). Both are examples of Abellán's prolonged task to efface the old photographs that she had sought and found. *Memoria líquida* is a circular testament of the image on the paper, only a fragment of which remains. The rest has been removed chemically and is preserved as an emulsion, transubstantiating the image into a liquid deposited in a flask beneath each of these portraits that introduce us to the indistinctness of these subjects. *La niebla de la memoria* takes another journey into the history of photography. The chemical vapour erasure of the images brings to mind the use of mercury vapour to reveal and develop the early daguerrotypes. One might say that the artist is undertaking a reverse process: from revealing to blurring or, more accurately, to dissolving. The process in this case appears to be a strategy of inverted alchemy, a kind of thwarting or counterplay. If the certainty of the portrait being a double of the subject, and therefore contains the soul of the person, were to glide over the photograph, from an animist understanding one might wonder if something of their spirit had been trapped in the flasks of *Memoria líquida*. Furthermore the convex glass of the two oval portraits in *La niebla de la memoria* consisting only of the remnants of the original photographs but no image, act as a sort of mirror image that reflect us. These photographic portraits inevitably remind us of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Oval Portrait" written in 1842 and originally entitled "Life in Death" in which the author's contemplations on art, love, life and death were set in motion by a miniature portrait of his mother.

The project chosen for the title of the exhibition, *A perpetuidad*, covers one of the largest spaces in the gallery with seventy two fragments of gravestones announcing the end of life, the physical or material disappearance that emerge as the reverse of remembrance and memory. This polyptych initiates a dialogue with *Encarnados* and *La imagen que resta* in an encounter between the fragility of body and glass and the stony hardness of the plates that presuppose attaining eternity and the perpetual remembrance of those who are no longer with us. It was precisely a gravestone that reminded and perturbed the shepherds of the presence of death in Nicolas Poussin's painting *Et in Arcadia ego* (1637-1638). Abellán assembles all these fragments into an archival repository, a record of the procedures of death, of the formulas customarily chosen for gravestones. If old photographs can be used in the poetics of the artist to spark in her spectators an exercise of imagining, fabulising and recreating the lives of others, these words engraved in stone can accomplish the same goal. Contemplating the scant, anonymous information on the granite and marble, we may be able to imagine something of the person concealed beyond the cold carved words.

And... from this anonymity we plunge into the detailed lives of Elvira Sánchez de la Orden Castillo de Cavia, Juan Peris Masip and their daughter Elvirita whose untimely early death sustains the tension and presence of death that hovers over Abellán's work. This particular project is entitled *Recibo la tuya* and, strictly speaking, it is constantly in progress. Their lives are opened up to us through the artist's collection of more than five hundred documents including more than 400 letters written by Elvira to her betrothed between 1896 and 1902. Some of these are on display in the exhibition for visitors to read and create their own tales. Also on display are replies to these generated by AI (Artificial Intelligence), engraved on black aluminium plates, time- and fire-resistant ferrotypes in dialogue with Cinerarias. Once again, the choice of material is not random: aluminium and the process itself (laser and AI) incorporate the contemporary as well as the imperishable and enduring. It could be said that this closes the expositive circle in an encounter with the black ferrotypes. With a difference of a hundred years, the metallic plates themselves alone evoke remembrance and memory.

Mostly, in Abellán's projects the photographic image never completely disappears. It is transformed as memory acts as repository and reconstructive agent. The artist appears to pursue the expression that Marcel Duchamp called *inframince* and that we might call radiant energy or the barely perceptible thinness, the very lastness of things. Duchamp explained this as being the warmth of a seat just vacated, the taste remaining in the mouth when smoking or the rustle of trousers perceived while walking. Perhaps the images and letters used by Tatiana are endowed with this radiant energy And it is up to us spectators to embrace the fact that photography and memories, although fragile, are inextinguishable and will accompany us forever.

**Juan Francisco Rueda, curator**  
Translated by Diana Mathieson

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