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opening hours: Wednesday - Friday 1 – 6pm,
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In the Absence Patricia Bentancur

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Curated by: Clio E. Bugel

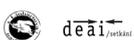
Opening: Thursday, November 12, 6pm

The law in most countries says that no one shall be judged in absentia. It is also said that silence is consent, which also explains the ban on trials without the presence of the accused, who cannot defend him- or herself if absent where he or she is being tried. In fact, what we think and believe and judge regarding people without giving them the chance to express themselves is subjective and, in a certain sense, also superficial. We judge people based on what we see, what we feel in view of what we see and what we know or have learned in other circumstances and previous experiences, perhaps similar, but inevitably different. To get to know another person, we have to interact with and relate to him or her. And to do that, we need to distance ourselves from pure subjectivity, set aside for a moment our certainties, judgments and personal prejudices. *In the Absence* deals with such beliefs, clichés and personal contradictions that, in each and every case, have a correlate in the collective sphere.

Patricia Bentancur showcases concerns that may seem merely personal, or even banal, in a tone that is neither grave nor altogether playful and in a wrapping that may, in principle, appear overly formal and aestheticist. The photographs and videos are formally impeccable; the handcrafted silk screens made with gold on cotton paper and the objects made with human hair, bronze and gold thread may come across as attractive or, owing to their evident and obsessive relation to beauty, fastidious. For that reason, *In the Absence* is an exhibition that requires time and patience. Circulating among all the objects and images that to all appearances aspire to visual and external perfection are a series of commonplaces, situations and everyday occurrences that, once removed from their contexts, shed their triviality and acquire a powerful symbolic charge, exposing, moreover, their strong collective resonance.

A clear example is the table with a broken leg tied to it by means of a golden thread. On one hand, it is a commonplace, everyday object. The table Bentancur has put on display is wooden, run-of-the-mill, but its status seems to have changed due to the loss of its usefulness – since its four legs constitute the necessary conditions for stability. Thus, the instability that renders it useless also makes it “special” and cancels out its a table-with-a-broken-leg condition. The table, thus transformed into something unique, generates a curiosity about its affective value which may serve as the reason for a repair which is as painstaking as it is absurd.

On the other hand, we have the popular saying “Tie it up with some wire,” which has become quite unpopular in Uruguay as it has become the symbol of a culture, a social class, that another class in the same society does not identify with – or rather one it wants to distinguish itself from. “Tie it up with some wire” has become a metaphor for laziness, a lack of ambition and aspirations, an absence of training and education, a leveling toward the bottom – in short, for mediocrity. In heated debates, the expression is even used to explain the underdevelopment of Uruguay by contrast with other more industrialized and, above all, more powerful countries, based on the fanciful notion that in such places nothing gets tied up with wire.



In Bentancur's table-as-artwork, the leg has not really been "repaired," despite having been tied up – and not with some folksy, democratic wire, but with a golden thread, as if the nobility of the measure actually served to restore some rank to the homespun repair. But the solution arrived at is absurd, because tying up a broken wooden leg is clearly not a viable fix; so, the leg is there, present as a historical object, bereft of its original function. Converted into an exhibition piece. Transformed, ultimately, into an (absurd) *objet d'art*.

In the Absence also plays with clichés about love, and more particularly with the amorous needs of women as seen from the most sexist and stereotypical vantage point – one which sees them as fragile, contradictory and capricious beings. A key example in this respect is "Things You Must Do to Make Me Happy," a checklist that provides an exhaustive catalogue of the most absurd, infantile and neurotic demands women can make of men, cancelled in a similarly stereotypical bureaucratic style with "LOVE ME" stamped diagonally in large letters across all the small print.

The untitled video in which two girls, whose shadows are all we see, play a classic clapping game and sing angelically and in a thousand ways about the love and hate caused by love and hate, operates according to the same code. The girls say they love the way they hate, hate the way they love and other variations on the same phrase with that childish but semi-neutral tone that children adopt when they sing entire songs in languages they do not know. As in a meaningless game, or as if unwittingly learning to "be a woman," repeating and internalizing the cliché of the hysterical woman who does not know what she wants and feeds on strong passions, on love and hate in equal measure.

Also filling the display window of banalities and stereotypes attributed to women are a bronze replica of a wishbone and a photograph titled *The Conversation*. In the case of the wishbone, that horseshoe-shaped chicken bone broken in two to see whose wish gets to come true, it is another semi-forgotten superstition that has returned recently as a fad among movie stars, who use it as an amulet plated in gold or silver attached to necklaces, bracelets and earrings. The apogee of the postmodern cliché.

The Conversation, for its part, is a photograph depicting a game widespread among boys and girls from at least 30 years ago, when wires were still essential for communicating at a distance.

Once more, one might think of the nonsensical list the most obsolete – yet still living – form of patriarchy considers feminine characteristics: superstition and curiosity, or meddling in the affairs of others. The interesting thing is that the patriarchal version of these "defects" – such as fetishism and spying, invasions of privacy and other present-day problems – are not considered masculine characteristics.

In the Absence is a work in progress. The collection of works that make up this exhibition has multiplied, been transformed and reformulated over time, but always as variations on a theme. In each new phase, and in each new location, *In the Absence* acquires new levels of meaning. And although it is not Bentancur's intention to present a gender-based exhibition – in fact, she rejects the label – a significant portion of her oeuvre takes up and emphasizes feminine stereotypes that, in absentia, outline the complementary and masculine stereotypes that are logically required to prop up the structure of clichés. In this way, with great discretion and subtlety, she completely disarms any initial bias toward the beauty of the images and the banality of the objects.

Clio E. Bugel

Patricia Bentancur (lives and works in Montevideo, Uruguay) is an artist and curator who trained at the Faculty of Architecture of Montevideo, the Superior School of Architecture of Madrid and New York University. A researcher with the Fulbright Academic Program specializing in architecture and contemporary art, she conducted her research at the Guggenheim Museum, the Media Arts Center and the New Museum of Contemporary Art of New York. Associate Artist at the Atlantic Center for the Arts/ACA-USA. She exhibits widely, among other venues, at Southern Latitude - Film Makers Cooperative, New York; and was selected to take part in the FIVA_Festival Internacional de video Arte_Argentina and the Festival Internacional de Cine eXperimental-DOBRA (Rio de Janeiro) Brazil; the Jordan National Gallery (Amman); the Cervantes Institute (Berlin); Matadero (Madrid); Rostrum (Malmö); the Museum of Modern Art (Bogota); Dello Scompiglio (Lucca); MUVIM/the Image Museum (Valencia); Tegen2 (Stockholm); the Arts Centre (Seville); the Contemporary Culture Centre, CCCB, the Museum of Contemporary Art, MACBA and Caixa Forum (Barcelona), and the Wilfredo Lam Centre (Cuba). She has been invited to the following biennials: Mercosur; New Media (Chile); Havana (Cuba); Ibero-American (Mexico); Belfort (France); JAFRE (Spain); Electronic Arts (France), and the New Media Biennial (Peru).

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