

Let's talk about storms

- by Juan Forn

There are those who can resist flames of the highest temperatures and who may, in turn, crack or break seemingly for no reason at all. When these people are involved in the arts, the outcomes are always worthy of our attention, because they put everything they have into what they do: they cannot cut corners, they cannot—even though they may burn for it.

I know someone like that. It is my cousin Sofia. In fact, she is my niece, but I prefer to think of her as a cousin, in equal terms generationally: her things and my things occur at the same time, she on one side of the Andes and me on the other side, with quite a few kilometres between us. She asks me about the sea, just outside my door; she asks me to describe the electric storms with thunder and lightning that are a classic of the Argentinean Pampa and coastline. (“Southeasterly again, baby”) and she in turn describes me the most hallucinating sunsets she enjoys (Santiago’s smog acts like a filter and produces a range of colours unknown to us over here); or those Chilean mornings when, after snowing overnight, the air becomes pure and of a blue that fractures your eyes.

We both come from a family that speak little, or rather not at all about feelings and emotions. Each one of us has embarked on a personal journey to express that which the rest of the family keeps bottled up and with seven seals of lacquer. We, on the other hand, speak about storms.

Sofia arrived in Chile pregnant with her first child. In Buenos Aires, she used to paint. Sofia rented a room to paint in the derelict house there was next to her first flat in Santiago, but the doctor forbade all contact with synthetic enamel. Sofia spent her pregnancy in that studio, obsessively cutting up sheets of coloured papers, from magazines dealing with colour exercises, optics, textures in the manner of Josef Albers. She abandoned the paint brushes for scissors and glue. She also began to collect broken pieces of wood she found in that derelict house. These she took to her small studio, where she manipulated them as if putting together a puzzle. She found that she was exceeding herself a bit. She felt an increasing need to use her hands more, but she needed a material that was more malleable to her hands.

The answer came as a flashback, a view of the clearest and most primitively pleasurable of her childhood: the shed her grandmother Guegue used to make her pottery, the damp clay that Guegue allowed her to knead and mould with her little fingers (no other grandchild was permitted to enter, touch and stay). Sofia felt in her hands what she needed and began to attend a ceramics workshop in Santiago and

then another one and another one.

The initial idea was to go slowly, to take it easy, but for Sofia, calm is at best a transitory and volatile state. She immediately sought to push the boundaries: to see how far she could get with the material, with form, with the process of firing. She broke up pieces to reassemble them or integrate them into others. She needed more space. She ended up having her own studio, with her own kiln. This was one of the two pivotal moments in her journey; when she ceased to entrust others with the firing of the pieces, when she could deal with the firing herself, infringing at will the laws of temperature on glazing and clay bodies, studying the properties and reactions of the elements: the alkali, the metals, the oxides and chemical compositions. The other pivotal moment was when she received from Buenos Aires, as a gift and inheritance from Guegue, her own box and personal collection of modelling tools. I don't know if you ever saw Sofia's hands. Sometimes she emails me photos of what she is doing; sometimes, she includes a photo of her hands after completing a piece. Her hands are completely scarred, the skin on her fingers is like elephant skin, wrinkled and rough. She wears no rings and has her fingernails cut close. The question that these hands seem to seek an answer to is 'what happens when form no longer responds to its form?

There is always something that triggers this kind of question, but when it does, we realize that the question already existed, un-uttered, without form or enunciation. In Sofia's case, this was triggered by the passing away of Guegue. She travelled to Buenos Aires for the burial, and while the rest of the family argued for every piece of the inheritance, she found two broken cups from the tea set that her grandmother had used all her life. She took them back to Chile without telling anyone and in her studio, she joined with clay those two cups, where their handles had broken off. Kierkegaard used to say that the problem with life is that one has to live it forward but we can only understand it looking backwards. We spend our lives doing this.

Sofia says there is no monastery in the crazy world we live in. She says that her pieces are—I love this definition precisely because of its undefinition--“abstractions that are something.” She often complains about not “having the strength of a man” to overcome the material's resistance. Her emails and the photos she attaches seem to be photos from a battlefield: let us talk about storms. Every email I receive invariably reminds me of that famous statement by Louise Bourgeois: “I ended up in sculpture-- this is tremendously important, because it allowed me to express, what I never dared express before.”

That's talking about storms.