

## XAVIER RIBAS: IN A DIM LIGHT

Opening: 19.01.2024, at 19:30h. Exhibition: 19.01.2024 > 30.03.2024

Guided visit with the artist: 19.01.2024 at 19:30h and 20.01.2024 at 12h

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About the exhibition *In a Dim Light*. Text by Xavier Ribas.

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In his book *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* Ghassan Hage argues that the environmental breakdown we are experiencing today is rooted in colonial processes of geographical expansion, appropriation, overexploitation of nature and dehumanization of the other, past and present: “The practices of racial and ecological domination”, he writes, “have the same roots” (2017: ix). The title of the exhibition, *In a Dim Light*, alludes to the fragile visibility that falls onto, and emanates from, the bodies, objects and landscapes that have been destroyed by these processes, and that inhabit spectrally the museums of the present.

“Invisible histories”, so called, hover as occluded realities “behind” all we most easily see – stories of the efforts, lives and natural forces that have gone, unrecognised, into making the objects, landscapes, structures, and systems of our world. In fact, these stories and histories are not invisible. Everything leaves a trace, as Walter Benjamin reminded us. Nothing happens without leaving some mark, some effect in the entangled nature of being. It is simply that, while some things shout their presence, shine bright and grab our eye – like the magnificent glacier in its pristine form; the light bathes it and reflects to us in sparkling clarity – some are more obscured. By circumstance, or the role they play in a particular culture or mentality. And to see these, we need to search in the dim light. As our eyes become accustomed, we are no longer looking at discrete objects, but at their constellations – nuances of their wider story and historical processes.

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*Afterlife* [2020] is composed of nine photographs and one text excerpt from Peter Weiss’s novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975). The photographs document plaster casts in the collection of the Museum of Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, made from sculptural fragments preserved in museums around the world. Weiss’s text describes the scene of the construction of the Great Altar of Pergamon, inspired by seeing the archaeological remains on display in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. He evokes the process of extracting the stone blocks from a quarry near



Xavier Ribas, *Afterlife* (detail), 2020

the place where the monument is being built, in which masters, sculptors, slaves and prisoners of war coexist in a relationship of production and inequality, while the bodies of the workers serve as inspiration for the sculptures for the frieze.

Ancient monuments, now reconstructed as ruins in archaeological parks and museums, are presented as unified, positive objects with a tangible past that “ought not to be disturbed” (Gordillo 2014: 6). However, such monuments and their sculptural elements cannot be considered separately from the damaged bodies of the labouring force who extracted the stones and were engaged in their construction. The defeated bodies of slaves and war prisoners resurface from the rubble of ancient temples and palaces with the sculptural fragments of Gods, Lapiths, Giants, Centaurs and Amazons. The museum displays of ancient remains are haunted by violent histories and by those “enlaboured” bodies, their presence marked on stone.

The plaster casts of ancient sculptural fragments, like ghosts and spectres of the original stones, respond to the desire to unfix the unique and fragile artworks in order to disseminate their histories and knowledge worldwide. Although the making of plaster casts dates from antiquity, it was only in the 19th century that they became part of national museum collections and displays, as at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, with the purpose of educating larger audiences. Since collecting archaeological remains from all over the world was part of the colonial project of western imperialism, one may ask what histories were to be disseminated through the plaster casts of ancient remains and what histories were to be disregarded. In their humble status as reproductions, the plaster casts offer an opportunity to begin to unlock our attention from those original and unique objects and direct our thoughts, as Theodor Adorno put it, to their constellations, to their historic positional value in relation to other objects, and to the processes stored in them (Adorno 1973: 163). Reorienting our thoughts from the objects to their constellations will allow us to pay attention to material histories and to the multifaceted textures of human labour.

The photographs of the plaster casts are ghosts and spectres once again of those original sculptures: ghosts of ghosts, spectres of spectres. Their framing aims to conjure the dim histories of the human bodies who worked the stones out from the quarries and into the realm of art, to evoke those labouring bodies by showing less and closing in. I would like to suggest that the afterlife of those ancient bodies – which were fixed and immobilised as the labouring force of extractive and violent economies, negated and destroyed in the creative act of monumental construction – is held in the missing limbs,





**Xavier Ribas**, *Afterlife* (detail), 2020

heads, faces, torsos that were left in the rubble, unrecognisable. The photographs point to these missing body parts not as voids, but as a kind of matter which, as Aristotle argued, is “bereft of body” (*Physics*, Book IV Part 1). To examine “negatively” those original sculptural fragments through the photographs of their plaster casts, that is, through what is missing in them, is, paraphrasing Gastón Gordillo, to do it by way of those bodies that were negated and that inhabit spectrally the museums of the present.

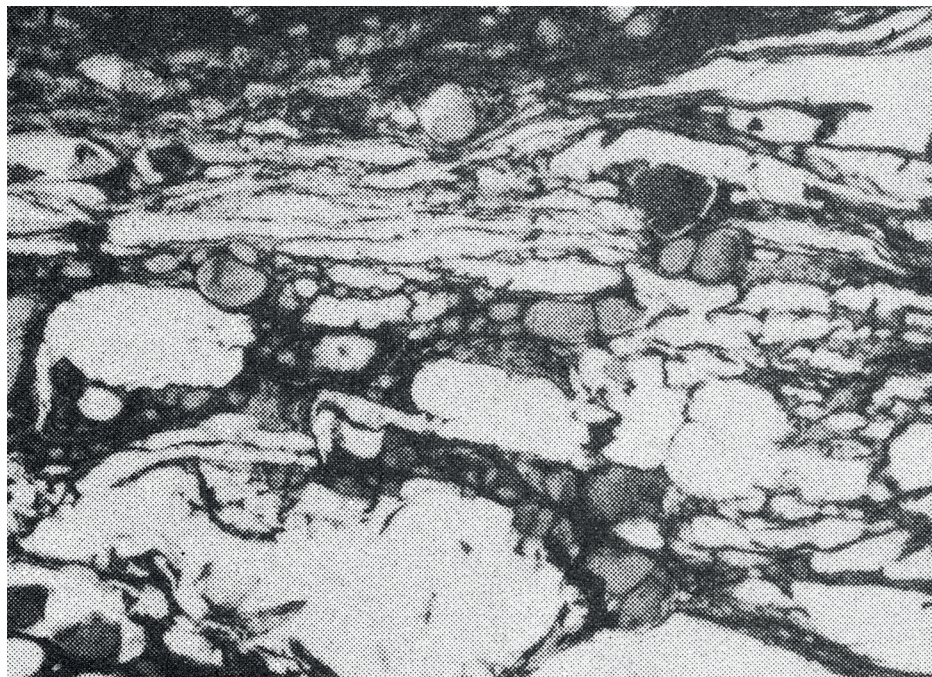
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*Dead Ice [Like Air Trapped in their Lungs]* [2024] is an installation of 40 photographs taken at the Juncal Norte glacier in Chile in January 2023, together with four archival images extracted from the 1959 bulletin of the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural in Santiago de Chile, where the scientific studies of the ice mummy of a child, excavated in 1954 from the Andean summit of El Plomo, were first made public.

Since the end of the Little Ice Age around the 1850s, and more noticeably from the beginning of the Great Acceleration of the 1950s, glaciers around the world have been receding, moving upwards and away towards the mountain heights, leaving behind fields of dead ice – ice which has ceased to flow and is gradually being covered with layers of mountain debris – reaching up to the sky. Unable to reproduce themselves, melting glaciers are “washing the future into the sea” (Leopold, 2021: 45).

For Andean Indigenous Communities a mountain is an “earth-being that is also a mountain” (De la Cadena, 2015: xxvii). Mountains are custodians of glacial ice and water that bring life to humans and non-humans near and far. Rather than pristine, inert, and remote from human influence, they see glaciers as sentient beings, alert to human behaviour, affecting and responsive to human interactions, animate and animating, and often described as intensely social, carriers of historical and cultural values (Cruikshank, 2005: 11, 68, 258). Glaciers are delocalized earth-beings, “systems” affecting vast geographies, rather than discrete accumulations of ancient ice tucked away in a distant and remote place. Traditional environmental knowledge sees glacial ice as a condensation of time past and future, an “archive of endangered memories” (Jonathan Boyarin, quoted by Cruikshank, 2005: 67). Retreating Andean glaciers expose evidence of human history. As they recede, they uncover ice mummies from the Inca Empire preserved for hundreds of years on the summits of the Llullaillaco volcano, the Aconcagua and El Plomo, among others: high-altitude sacrificial sites where *capacochas* were performed, ritual offerings to the Apus – custodians of glacial ice and water – of children who were buried alive and died from hypothermia.





Xavier Ribas, *Dead Ice [Like Air Trapped in their Lungs]* (detail),  
2024

The eroded formations of dead ice and mountain debris, ice white shades of cyan blues, are a configuration of scars, like glyphs, a coded message to finally make us see, like a “reverse hallucination” (Springer and Turpin, 2017: 10), what is manifestly present: an endangered future. Glaciers, solid and fossil waters, are entangled in a global economy of capitalist practices of extraction, consumption, and pollution that, contrary to traditional environmental knowledge, takes the Earth as a resource. The dead ice and the stones configure a *calligraphy* of absence, a manifestation of “the theft of history”, to borrow an expression from anthropologist Jack Goody, which points to the potential futures negated by the colonial extraction and appropriation of other people’s cultural and material heritages.

*There is no place that does not see us.*

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Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics*, 1973.

Cruikshank, Julie, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters and Social Imagination*, 2005.

De la Cadena, Marisol, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*, 2015.

Goody, Jack, *The Theft of History*, 2012.

Gordillo, Gastón R., *Rubble. The Aftermath of Destruction*, 2014.

Leopold, Aldo, *Think Like a Mountain*, 2021.

Springer, Anna-Sophie and Etienne Turpin, *Reverse Hallucinations in the Archipelago*, 2017.

***Dead Ice [Like Air Trapped in their Lungs]*** is part of the Traces of Nitrate project developed in collaboration with Chilean visual artist Ignacio Acosta and English historian Louise Purbrick. This research project is based at the University of Brighton and the Royal College of Art in London, and is supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

**Xavier Ribas** (Barcelona, 1960) is a photographer, lecturer at the University of Brighton, and associate lecturer at the Universitat Politècnica de València. He studied Social Anthropology at the University of Barcelona and Documentary Photography at the Newport School of Art and Design. His photographic work investigates contested sites and histories, and geographies of abandonment. His recent works take the form of large photographic grids, often including text, archive materials and moving image as multiple, composite forms of examining temporary settlements, sites of development and exclusion, border territories, and geographies of extraction. He lives and works in London and Barcelona.

Ribas has participated in international exhibitions, including: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2011); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona-MACBA (2014); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía- MNCARS, Madrid (2014); Le Bal, Paris, France (2015); The Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK (2015); Machine Room, Santiago, Chile (2018); Porto Photography Biennale, Portugal (2021); Bank of Spain, Madrid, Spain (2023); C/O Berlin, Germany (2023); CaixaForum Madrid, Spain (2023).

He has received awards, commissions and scholarships from the Arts and Humanities Research Council - AHRC (2012-2016, 2017-2018), the International Photography Research Network - IPRN, United Kingdom (2006); Fundación Telefónica (2005) and Commande Publique du Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Center National des Arts Plastiques (2006), among others.

His works are, among others, in the following public collections: La Caixa Foundation Contemporary Art Collection; Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA); Museum of Contemporary Art of Castilla y León (MUSAC); Galician Center for Contemporary Art (CGAC); National Photography Collection, Generalitat de Catalunya; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

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