



FORS AT PIER 24:
CITY
— & —
MEMORIES

I

*"On the seashore seated and blind
infinite chance pulls the strings"¹*

On the shores of the impressive Bay of San Francisco sits a magnificent space for contemporary art, designed to provide an intimate environment for viewing and learning about photography. It is Pier 24, where the Fundación Pilara's permanent photography collection is on display.

Built in 1935, this historic building is located just south of the Ferry Building, and after more than 30 years of abandonment, it was acquired by the Foundation. Its careful and intelligent restoration transformed the space into a 28,000-square foot hybrid of sorts, half warehouse and half gallery.² The scale of the space, something close to monumental, makes it possible for the vast collection to be shown with few restrictions, and given its privileged location next to the Embarcadero Promenade right below the bridge, it offers an impressive panoramic view of the bay with the serene subjectivity provided by art, especially photography.

The work of José Manuel Fors has become part of this collection. Perhaps it is because this Cuban's art is among the most unusual and seductive in his country. The roots and development of his work are fundamentally in Havana, also around a bay, but one which looks out at the Caribbean Sea. And while that is not a direct referent in his pieces, they are pieces that are enveloped in an infinite ocean of reminiscence and associations. This preference is also probably based on the fact that Fors is much more than a photographer, and enjoys that deep, complex quality that makes him a contemporary Renaissance man, an irremediably postmodern seducer.

Incorporeal and infinite, memory and time are too elusive for him to approach directly. So the artist becomes philosopher, anthropologist, narrator, collector, and poet. That transfer of strategies and effort to undertake dissimilar—but complementary—bodies of knowledge and action has permeated his work with a sort of intimate universality that favors decipherings and readings that go far beyond the immediate temporary story that is so common in the national visual arts production of his contemporaries. Whatever the reason, recurring fate or the most absolute coincidence, the work of Fors has found the ideal place to be displayed: Pier 24.

Comprising more than 2,000 photographs, most of them from the 20th and 21st centuries, the center's collection brings together historic, modern, and contemporary works. It is the creation of collector and philanthropist Andrew Pilara and his wife Mary. An exquisite sensibility distinguishes the selection of images and the style of the venue, where only scheduled visits are allowed. After making an appointment, visitors have two hours to view the collection, alone or on a guided tour, as they so choose. There are no signs or texts on the walls, which is why everything seems to propitiate an atmosphere of privacy and rest for connecting, in silence, with the art. In parallel, the foundation has an exchange program for photographers, educators, collectors, and curators who are capable of sharing diverse areas with the public and encouraging an appreciation of photography as a medium.



Interior and exterior of the Pilara Foundation

While the collection tends to be North American in spirit—with important pieces by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus—Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa also are represented in relevant works by artists such as August Sander, Daido Moriyama and Zwelethu Mthethwa. Using a very broad organizational principle, generalized in the social and topographical changes produced by industrialization, the Pilara Collection explores the photography medium's capacity as a documentary instrument, and its quality as a technological process in and of itself. Thus, it includes images by Lewis Hine—among the firsts photographs in the collection—Meter Hujar, Garry Winogrand and Larry Clark. There are also surprising industrial landscapes by artists like Albert Renger-Patzsch, most recently, Bernd Hilla Becher, Lee Friedlander, Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams and Frank Gohlke. The selection also included, necessarily, China's Sze Tsung Leong and his particular way of seeing the drastic transformations of his country's economy.

Changing conventions in studio portraits is another theme here. Walker Evans' well-known series are joined by the work of Mike Disfarmer, Judith Joy Ross, Richard Avedon and William Eggleston. Of course, the collection contains the work of numerous contemporary photographers. *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, by Hiroshi Sugimoto, the only complete series in private hands, is another cornerstone of this collection, which also includes portraits by Philip-Lorca Dicordia, Alec Soth, Katy Grannan and Jackie Nickerson.

In this context, the work of José Manuel Fors is organically integrated. Interior landscapes, expanded in their sensorial dimension and rooted in his memories of his native city's buildings, form a large circle, *Habana*. Packages of remembrance, portraits of the spirit constructed by intimate stories that are tied, subjected, with cords, in a series of 11 *Atados de Memorias* (Bundles of Memories).

II

*"Might you be the dream of a dream
of a dream, the real,
the other side that sees...?"*



Fors and Habana

Difficult to categorize, Fors continues to surprise us with his incessant, natural exercise of intellect, in which he uses his long-educated and trained intuition to juxtapose an infinite accumulation of interstices from his own life experience. Postcards, photographs, negatives, sheets of paper, thimbles, spools of thread, scapulas, old camera lenses....details from the passage of his lineage through this world that dominate his attention in a specific moment. He then weaves a web of evocations, reworks the semantics, remolds, and assembles, arousing multiple associations and countless possible anecdotes.

"My first solo show was titled *Acumulaciones* (Accumulations); since then, I have had a notable tendency to accumulate things. One of my accumulations is composed of fallen leaves. For me, seeing that the leaves have fallen, that they slowly change color, turning into sepia tones before they finally disintegrate, visually represents the natural process of the passage of time. The accumulation of documents and objects does not always have a direct connection with my family memories, but it is an intimate sort of work that continues to grow. It also has external influences. You were reminding me that having worked for 10 years in a museum³ could have influenced me in that habit of collecting and trying to recover everything that is memory. Unquestionably, that had something to do with it. I especially remember a department that was called the Department of Illustrations, where works on paper were preserved and restored."⁴

However, this is not the attitude of someone who is seeking the spectacular and grandiloquent. His works are more like snippets and shreds, which at a given moment radiate the view of the artist, who, with certain indifference, seems to have piled them into a furtive corner of a dark room. Later he recuperates them, as if unwinding the skein of a sensorial, private labyrinth, unembarrassed by transmutations or contamination. Just as he manipulates the camera's diaphragm and speed, or prepares a set for taking photos, he uses found images and images deliberately created by others, manipulates old and new negatives, rephotographs, veils, recontextualizes, and superimposes. All of these "quotes" blur his individual DNA, and endless new associations are regenerated, very much in harmony with a postmodern esthetic of sorts immersed in the introspective, but not in the strictly personal or private; rather, it is a chain of suggestions rooted in experiences that are close and at the same time collective.

What results from all of this is commentary that is simultaneously furtive and evident: history, life, death, memory, oblivion, identity, the present, and the past. How and why does he discriminate, distinguish, choose, and manipulate? How does he compact and organize? What other knowledge and abilities does he use? That means going deeper into his personal strategies, which in a certain sense are unknown even to the artist himself. With a natural offhandedness, armed with a solid theoretical repertoire of selection and unquestionable domination over form and structure, Fors lies in wait for the life that takes place all around him. He fragments and subsequently recovers essential segments for duplicating them, transmuting them,

“Literature occasionally gives me ideas, and in a more practical sense, for the titles of my works. For example, when I make a piece called *Jardín* (Garden) or *Atados de Memorias* (Bundles of Memories), it is because I’ve been reading Dulce María Loynaz; I had accumulated papers, but I came to the final title thanks to Dulce María. In Lezama Lima’s *Paradise*, I discovered an excerpt that make a very good fit with my way of observing. *Hojarasca* (Fallen Leaves) surely emerged from reading Collazo’s *Onoloria. Sombras bajo quinientos billones de árboles* (Shadows under five hundred billion trees) was suggested to me by a Ray Bradbury story. It doesn’t mean that I read the book, find the sentence, and immediately start making the piece; the idea exists, but the writer moves me with his or her agreement, and I like to take something of his or hers as an homage of sorts. Recently I found an excerpt from Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead*, and it impressed me because at that moment I was finding myself increasingly breaking up images into fragments: “Reality is infinitely diverse, compared with even the subtlest conclusions of abstract thought, and does not allow of clear-cut and sweeping distinctions. Reality strives toward fragmentation, toward infinite variety.”

III

“under the eternal afternoon who walks through a city corroded by time”

Since its beginnings, photography has captivated human beings. Fascinated by its power to depict, immersed in its infinite resources and possibilities, or simply curious, our use of this medium—for scientific, domestic, artistic, or technical purposes—has grown exponentially throughout the years. Along with its ability to freeze a moment in time and to perpetuate the material existence of things, photography has taken on multiple and increasingly complex applications and functions

Fors, the most unusual of the “volumétricos,”⁵ and viewed as a rare bird by many, spent a decade working as a museographer and making brief forays into matter painting, before he finally concentrated his exploration on photography. In doing so, he was combining his artistic training at the San Alejandro Academy with a family tradition—even his silviculturist grandfather had practiced photography. However, very soon his work with the lens became more of a recognition of the photography medium as a principle of artistic creation in and of itself. This type of photography challenged traditional ideas, and the element of perception and trompe l’oeil began to take on primary importance. From then on, the concept of authorship was relegated to the background for him, and the image’s composition involved an architectural principle based on fragmentation and juxtaposition.

After more than 30 years of reissuing his recurrent—and obsessive—love of recycling his play with time and memory, Fors has constructed two exquisite pieces for Pier 24. The first is a circle two meters (6.5 feet) in diameter, titled simply *Habana*. The images radiate from an old camera lens that belonged to his father. For this artist, who lives in a quiet, peaceful neighborhood in his native city, and who, without being a hermit, seldom leaves his house, Havana is shelter, home, and cosmos at the same time, like an *amnios* of dust and stone.

“The photos of Havana that I used in the piece were taken by me. I don’t like taking photos of people in the street; I simply can’t do it. That’s why I revealed negatives of my family for the individuals that appear very close-up, and where there were no negatives (in the case of my grandparents and great-grandparents, for example) I copied portraits from my personal collection. Not photographing strangers gave the piece a touch of greater intimacy.”

Hundreds of small photos comprise this large circle that embodies an infinite thematic universe: the city where the artist lives. Hundreds of probable histories hatched from his own. Evoking an oracle, or perhaps an old calendar, the record of his private personality is revealed by the subjectivity of the glazes and textures, and the making of the object itself. The spectator is left at the mercy of the game of perceptive distance: close-up, countless diverse images suggest—filter—presences, memories, details, streets, buildings: endless histories. Barely fragments, particles, they impel us to take a step back and try to perceive of the assembled images as a whole. What is left then is one big abstraction where the individual fragments are disarranged and fuse together. An atlas of the memory of sorts, where words are drawn that are embodied only in silence.

“Without question, many times I have taken the liberty of mixing mementos, visual memories, and that predisposes others to look at the piece based on their own experiences. When I hold a solo exhibition, I try to transmit above all a state of mind that is close to mine.”

His 11 *Atados de Memorias* refer to family photos of the artist’s grandparents, parents, and aunts and uncles. It is probably a search for a particular resizing of the portrait as a pictorial genre that contains within itself an explicit reference to literature, writing, and narrative. Bundles of old papers, forgotten letters, the secrets and confessions of a lineage revived subtly from a distance, pursuing the age of time.

“Both *Habana* and *Atados de Memorias* have a very pale tone; I did not completely finish the tinting. I jumped from the bleaching to putting them in a new fixer, or very lightly tinted them to sepia. I wanted to achieve a very lost image.”

The fascination that Fors’s work holds for us probably stems from the temporal unreality that his pieces provoke, that ability to capture the brevity of an instant right at the moment that it escapes us. The commanding silence of Pier 24, its atmosphere of exterior salt residue and its suggestive nautical lighting will all serve as a complement to the hundreds of unfindable and unread inscriptions that have crossed an entire continent to go from one ocean to another and then remain there, beyond time.

Basarrate, April 23, 2013

1. All quotes are from the poetry collection *Amnios* by Raúl Hernández Novás.
2. The information about Pier 24 was taken from its official website, www.pier24.org
3. J.M. Fors worked at Havana’s Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in the 1980s. (Ed.)
4. This quote is taken from an interview of the artist conducted by the author in April 2013.
5. Referring to the artists who participated in *Volumen 1*, the exhibition that marked the start of the so-called New Cuban Art.