



Project Gallery: León & Cociña
February 4–May 29, 2016

Cristóbal León
b. 1980, Santiago, Chile; lives in Santiago

Joaquín Cociña
b. 1980, Concepción, Chile; lives in Santiago

Los Andes (The Andes), 2012
Color animation film, with sound, 3 min., 40 sec.
Courtesy the artists and Upstream Gallery

Project Gallery: León & Cociña is organized by Pérez Art Museum Miami Chief Curator Tobias Ostrander.
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Project Gallery

León & Cociña

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English

Los Andes (The Andes)

The Flower and the Mountain

The story of Vladislav Starevich might serve as the origin myth for animation film. Before becoming one of the masters of the form, Starevich worked as director of the Natural History Museum in Kaunas, Lithuania. As he tells the story, he wanted to make a film about the life of beetles, but the beetles inevitably died when they were put under the strong lights needed for filming. So he decided to solve the problem by replacing the beetles' legs with wires and animating them, frame by frame. In performing this small act of sorcery, injecting life into the dead insects' bodies, Starevich established the necromantic quality of the technique and created the basis for an entire tradition of stop-motion filmmaking. One might say that every animated film is a spell cast or an act of modern spirit rapping. Cristóbal León and I had never experienced this so vividly as with the creation of *Los Andes*.

In 2012, over the course the year, we were producing *Flowers*, a documentary on Miguel Serrano (b. 1917, Santiago, Chile; d. 2009, Santiago), a Chilean writer and diplomat and a key figure in Chilean Nazism. Serrano is best known for his long quest for spiritual enlightenment, and for having been one of the main advocates of Esoteric Hitlerism. He even attempted to create his own mythology, producing a hybrid of German and Vedic traditions on Chilean soil.

It is hard to talk about Serrano. I had met him years earlier, when I was going out with a niece of his and was invited to his house three or four times. His recalcitrant Nazism

makes it a little embarrassing for me to talk about him with admiration or affection, but the truth is, my encounters with this distinguished-looking man with penetrating blue eyes unquestionably marked my destiny as an artist. Even before meeting him, I had been intrigued by his literary work. He is one of the few writers who has dared to create an imaginary universe in Latin America comparable to J. R. R. Tolkien's or to *Star Wars*.

On February 28, 2009, the day of Serrano's death, Cristóbal and I decided to make a documentary about him. First, we attended his peculiar *sui generis* funeral. Then, for several reasons, the project dragged along until 2012, when we ran across a group of poets who had been disciples of Serrano's—the self-proclaimed Society of the Nonexistent Flower. We had several meetings with the group, and later, in October, we managed to get ourselves invited to one of their spiritualist sessions, about which we had only obtained bits and pieces of information. The session took place at an insurance adjusters office in downtown Santiago.

We still are not exactly sure what happened there. Cristóbal and I were instructed to go to the New World Insurance Adjusters offices, located in a semi-occupied apartment building across from Parque Forestal. The session lasted about two hours, and it seemed pretty ridiculous to me. The attendees, all dressed in black leather, put on a pathetic spectacle. One of them, speaking in a high falsetto, jerked



around, pretending to be possessed by Serrano's spirit, while the others asked him questions and listened reverentially to his answers. I never found out whether they were trying to do some comic shtick or whether they were just terrible actors. I didn't dare laugh, but it all felt like some dreadful school play. At one point, Cristóbal said he wasn't feeling well and excused himself to go to the bathroom. I didn't see him again that day.

The next night, Cristóbal rang my bell. He told me he'd woken up that morning in a vacant lot outside Parral, a city a little over 200 miles from Santiago. Everything he told me sounded strange and, at the time, even funny. The truth is, I didn't see at first how upset he was, how much trouble he was having getting over the episode. "As soon as I came back from the bathroom," he told me, "the room turned liquid. I was transported somehow to a kind of underground temple. The figure of Serrano—or his body, I don't know—appeared before me with its head all wrapped in cloth, to prevent the fluids from oozing out. Afterward I saw it was only his head that materialized, and I could clearly see his features. I was struck that his eyes were closed."

To calm poor Cristóbal down, I proposed we make an animated film about the events, just as he had experienced them. We shut ourselves up for two months in our studio, working on what would become *Los Andes*. It was an intense time: my wife and I were expecting our first child, while, at the same time, I

watched Cristóbal spiral downward. Sometimes he would act like a religious fanatic; he had always been intense, but now he had a distressingly obsessive attitude toward accuracy in our portrayal of the events. The problem was, his version of those events changed from one day to the next, and even more disturbing was that my own memory of that day started to change, as though a veil were being drawn away and a traumatic episode that I had blocked out was being revealed.

Sometimes the little room we were working in was more like a therapy center than an animation studio, and I don't know how we managed to finish the short film. Today, watching it gives me a sense of strangeness, as though I don't quite recognize it as my own work.

We've spent years following the trail of Serrano. He has become a sort of companion-ghost, or even something more than that. I live with and talk to him. As part of our documentary project, we are about to take a trip to Antarctica, following in his footsteps. Serrano once met up in the Swiss Alps with Carl Jung and Hermann Hesse to form the Hermetic Circle, which expanded to include Adolf Hitler in Antarctica. Or, at least Hitler's spirit. Serrano traveled around in 1947–48, looking for the refuge where he thought he might find Hitler—in the oases of temperate water amid the ice, or at the entrance to the subterranean world.



In late 1943, in the midst of the war, Admiral Karl Dönitz made a very strange statement, which appeared in newspapers all over the world: “The German U-boat fleet is proud to have made an earthly paradise, an impregnable fortress, for the Führer, somewhere in the world.”

Where was this paradise? Serrano believed it was in Antarctica. I honestly believe that paradise is within us; our bones are its columns and our flesh, its walls. *Los Andes* is just that—the search for an interior temple or paradise. It is also the mantra that was dictated to us by a voice outside this world. The materialization of the work is the result of a failed attempt to crystallize a marvelous image.

Joaquín Cociña
December 2015

Biography

Cristóbal León (b. 1980, Santiago, Chile) and Joaquín Cociña (b. 1980, Concepción, Chile) have been working together in Santiago since 2007. They both studied at the Universidad Católica, Santiago. León also studied at Universität der Künste, Berlin and De Ateliers, Amsterdam. Recent solo exhibitions of their work were held at Casa Maauad, Mexico City (2015); Centro Cultural de España, Santiago (2014); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago (2014); Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (2014). Their work has been included in group exhibitions at numerous venues, including the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago (2013); Venice Biennale (2013); Bienal de Montevideo (2012); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2012); Fundación Proa, Buenos Aires (2010); Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2009); Kunsthalle Berlin-Lichtenberg, Berlin (2007), and many others.

All images: *Los Andes (The Andes)* [stills], 2012
Color animation film, with sound, 3 min., 40 sec.
Courtesy the artists and Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam