

Adrián Doura, *MontañAgua* at the Museo de Bellas Artes, Salta, Argentina

With his exhibition title *MontañAgua* [Mountain (and) Water], Adrián Doura pays tribute to *shanshui* – the ancient Chinese ideogram for “landscape” made up of *shan*: “mountain,” and *shui*, “water/river”) – and with it, to the civilization which has, for millennia, honored landscape as the supreme genre in painting. Yet the Spanish portmanteau word tells a further, more intricate tale: due to the ‘y’ sound in the “ñ” of *montaña*, one cannot help but pronounce mountain-*and*-water; yet the abrupt capital A in *Agua* enacts – through purely visual means – a literal ‘precipitation’: preempting a written-out “y,” it asserts water’s dominion over earthly heights.

The formula *Montaña + Agua* may suggest either fertility or erosion: in fact, the show offers, on the one hand, high-altitude scenes of a glistening, at times almost enameled, freshness; and on the other hand, Argentine “masterpieces” of erosion that are almost ludicrously figurative, and extremely well known under such nicknames as The Mushroom, the Inca’s Head, The Sentry (only the Submarine’s missing from this group!).

Water has been the main element in Adrián Doura’s landscapes, and landscape his genre par excellence: in the headings in his website, the paintings of bodies of water are classed as landscapes; the quasi-oceanic presence of the broad Plate River, of course, though fresh water, rules out labelling them *marines/marinas/* seasapes. Doura is a master at painting waters – and steep mountains too, for that matter, though the two subjects have been treated separately, with one notable exception. The waters are invariably empty, boatless, shoreless, unpeopled – painted in a wide chromatic and textural range, gathering powerful volume against huge ephemeral skies. Till now, however, he has, so to speak, studied the beast in its lair, observing the limitless permutations of water within the bounds of river or sea, rather than in its transformative contact with the earth.

A frequent but never exclusive landscape painter since 1993, Doura, in accepting the invitation of Salta’s Museum of Fine Arts to create this group of new works, interrupted a cycle of figure painting that reinterprets in contemporary guise classic Western myths of violence. Before that, he created a monumental, seven-panel polyptych, exhibited in a medieval chapel in Arles (France) that combined, for once, human figures, a vast sea and a rocky landscape. Putting a challenge to faith, he placed his *summa* in this austere religious setting accompanied by *tondi* of waters he has described as “the framework for a giant turntable of the void,” “images without nostalgia, full of emptiness.”

In *MontañAgua*, by contrast, Doura clearly relishes the plenitude of the intensely varied surfaces he depicts, from the Plate River to Argentina’s northwest. These capacious landscapes play constantly upon expectations of anthropomorphic or creaturely presences, through idols that communicate through portents of

weather or time of day or ambiguous lines on rocky surfaces that suggest an inscrutable “gaze” on the part of nature. The peaks of the Aconcagua (subtitled here “Ojo de Agua”: “source” or “spring,” literally “eye of water”) harbors a hint of eagle’s profile with an eagle’s eye that is echoed in the foreground by an eye-like lake or pond; the breeze or shadows over the ravine in *Río y rocas* [River and Rocks] suggest some *genius loci* taking hold of a markedly feminine ravine; the sun at dusk in *Río con nube rosa* [River with Pink Cloud] conjures up some angry god. Water which thousands of years ago sculpted the Inca’s Head has created a literally grotesque *capriccio*, which also is a term used in art history, along with *veduta di fantasia*, for the historical *veduta ideata* Doura acknowledges as his artistic legacy, the model for his landscape painting.

Indeed, in the absorption or interiorization that turns a mere natural site into a “landscape,” Doura recapitulates the evolution from the 18th-century *veduta ideata* to that of the 19th: first, a synthesis of various ideal perspectives usually gathered with the camera obscura; later, a more impressionistic product, though one still representing the wonders of Rome or, above all, the canals of Venice. Doura has, however, applied the compositional principles of this product of European Enlightenment to the dizzying vastness of the New World, on a scale that defies all channeling, all *canalización*. In this sense he considers cinematography – above all, the tracking shot – more apt than photography to convey the perceptual and physical labor he must exert in the face of these immensities.

His “camera” tracks and “travels” (in Spanish the track or dolly shot is called un *travelling*), but what lenses and filters does it use? His response to these varied surfaces reveal the artist’s broad familiarity with the European and American painting styles. In certain desert scenes, Doura punctures his quasi-photographic precision – achieved through brushstrokes, after all, not pixels, – by a mix of the easy-going drawing of comic books and a kind of pointillism. Doura has visited all the sites he paints, yet never disdains using photographic information to give these scenes the greatest possible sensory intensity. As such, he blithely accepts Freud’s characterization of contemporary man as a “prosthetic god,” – underscoring his adoption of that role at the very start of this show, in “Cruzando el charco” [Crossing the Channel], with its Olympian vision of highly animated clouds viewed from an airplane window, inevitably recreated from a photo archive.

That opening visit among the clouds finds its counterpart in the “world’s highest archaeological site,” the volcano Llullaillaco in the province of Salta, a site which also alludes to the end of water, since its name allegedly derives from two quechua words which together mean “dryness” or “false/deceitful water”, i.e., the small amount of snow a volcano can retain.

Viewers may well recognize three other direct views of Salta, two of which flank this concluding vision of Llullaillaco. Hung separately, *Valle con cardones* (Valley with Giant Cacti, seen from route 40, between Cachi and Molinos), with its corner of dark clouds, is literally a calm before the storm. *Río y rocas* [River and

Rocks], along the same route, combines – along with *Cuesta del Viento* [Windy Slope] – a sunny calm and fresh breezes with a few dramatic clouds over a lightly frothing current. The body of water in this latter painting shares its artificial nature with that of the waterway in the diptych *Río con nube rosa* [River with Pink Cloud] (the Calchaquí river seen from the Cachi Bridge), where the foam turns virulent, with bobbing petrified skulls, some of them open on top as though trepanned. Painted in the province of Buenos Aires – at a point where the Atlantic current tends toward brown from the muddy confluence of the River Plate – near a round anniversary of the era of state violence that led the painter in his youth to leave his native country, this vision of the dead appearing in their riverbed cannot be considered mere baroque *capriccio*. Over this long, long stream glares an immense cloud, a headdress shape that swathes a raging dying sun resembling a heated coal ... or miniature volcano.

The painting series of mythic Europe violence Doura momentarily suspended in Paris has found its counterpart in ancestral, Andean sacrifice. The absence of the human figure has given *Montaña Agua* the bracing freedom of unverifiable scale; now, though, human figures return in a sort of artistic rite as the artist, five days prior to the opening of his show, has drawn in black acrylic, on the museum's long curved wall, imaginary slopes of the volcano – a rite to commemorate the ancestral sacrifice performed to ensure, precisely, the flow of water, and with it, health and fertility. Doura's counter-act of creation allows for the renewal of human forms, and those we see once again are appropriately young ones.

David Jacobson