

The Island: In between the shipwreck and paradise  
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“The tremulous and forlorn soul suffers with the coming of dawn”.  
José Martí.

To my friend, Pacha Yoyi, known to the rest of humanity as Jorge Brioso

## I-The island and the journey

The island and the journey. The island and the journey are the two images which indiscriminately drift through my mind as I observe the pieces of artwork contemplated in the exhibition *Pause* (2011) by Adrián Martínez Marí. When I think about his drawings of sunken boats which are created from threads, pins and light in his artwork *Calypso*<sup>1</sup>, or the palm trees and islands cut out of cardboard and then placed on wood in the piece *Sin título*<sup>2</sup> (2011), I find myself picturing an island and I am reconnected with distant memories and past experiences.

And in thinking of the recurring images in his work of art looking at the island and also that which is a fundamental part of an islander's imaginary, the journey, I remember, bittersweetly, how both the journey and the island, and the island and the journey have significantly marked the course of my life. It then becomes clear to me how this artist, who at times chooses to use delicate materials such as thread and light, and at others the noble solidness of wood, weaves together a poetic in which the island and the journey share metaphoric parallels: paradise, calm tides, and stormy seas, but also the sensation of being adrift, and lastly, of the shipwreck. This analogy is not an uncommon one. Let us not forget that utopias are always born in islands. Tomas Moro and Francis Bacon, in large part the inventors of the utopian genre, glorified the locations isolated from the reality of the continent that their era imposed on them. It is worth noting the fact that these two men who were the precursors of the utopian genre were also islanders themselves. This piece of information, which is by no means insignificant, tells us two things: islands offer a privileged position from which to imagine utopias; and that islanders are more likely to envision this idyllic place which is, irreversibly, far from anything that is familiar.

When I gaze upon the artwork by Martínez Marí, the island does not seem to emerge from the ocean, nor has there been any separation, no piece of historic continent, but rather it seems more like a dwelling, a species of nest made from thread, light, shadow and palm trees suspended between the seas and the sky, I feel the sunlight, the smell and the humidity of a real island caress my body. Islands are a utopia given the peculiar notion of habitation that they embody. You can be there, but not be completely yourself there. The island gives a transient character to everything which exists within its boundaries, and it is this brevity and nomadism which islands impose on their inhabitants which leads us to envision an ‘unreal place’ - ‘better place’, where things do reach their full potential. You are never actually in utopia, the reason why is that it is an unreal place, but you can be there in such a way so as to allow yourself to compare everything to its perfect state, no wonder it is the best place to be. This insular ambivalence takes two forms: on the one hand, there is the isolation from everyone, and everything - “the curse of being surrounded by water”, as Virgilio Piñera would say; on the other, there is the feeling of being at the centre of everything that surrounds you, or, without the obstacles presented by so such vast areas of land, of merging with the cosmos - “The island, both different and indistinct at the same time in the cosmos”, as Lezama Lima would say.

1 *Calypso* by Martínez Marí

2 *Untitled*

Islanders appear to have been biologically blessed, or perhaps it would be better to say that they carry a gene that makes them acutely aware of their whereabouts at all times. This sensibility is one which compels them to understand the distance and obstacles that separate them from the nearest piece of dry land. Paradoxically, the very thing that separates them from dry land is that which also connects them—the air, the sea and the sky. However, the air and the sky are less humane obstacles. By this I mean they are obstacles that require a super-human effort to overcome them. In addition to the human body and four floats for crossing the sea, you need a combination of more advanced “technologies” to overcome them. In Martínez Marí’s work, perhaps this is why the islands, the vessels, and the humans that travel aboard are always separated by the sea, or perhaps it would be better to say separated by a ‘clean’ space, a uncluttered space that does not contain any other symbolic element other than its own hollowness, its own immeasurable depths of separation and weightlessness. His technique of using thread, which at times is similar to the early works of Carlos Garaicoa, aims to accentuate a sensation of weightlessness in the pictorial space; this is achieved by using pins to separate the drawing from the paper or wall which projects the figures into the three-dimensional space of sculpture. What is more, in the artwork of Martínez Marí, in his poetic, we see that the medium of photography is explored as much as drawing; examples of this are the photographic series *Postales3* (2010), and *Fireworks* (2011). However, drawing as an expressive device, as a shaping element of a poetic with neo-figurative nuances, as an exercise of the imagination, and as poetic technique that translates its representations of reality is truly what defines the unique vision of the artist. His photographs, following a conceptual order, reflect on the language of photography when calling into question the role of objective documenter which has been imposed by the modern age onto the photographic record. In *Fireworks*, a series exploring UFOs, the artist has photographed a landscape which is then projected onto a wall (using a digital projector), and then different images are superimposed onto it (using a slide projector) until the desired image is obtained. A new photograph is taken of this staged photographic construction, and despite its artificial nature, this new photo is seen as an authentic photographic record by any viewer. Therefore, the sighting of UFOs, a popular cultural phenomena globally, when looked at from the perspective of the dichotomy between fiction vs. reality, is treated as a slice of reality whose truth is found precisely in the “photographic documenting” of the events. *Fireworks* plays with viewers in two ways, by tricking the viewer’s perception and, at the same time, by also offering the viewer elements which will make them aware of the “scam”. For this, the only thing you need to do is pause, and stop to notice for example, that the artist has intentionally left the computer’s mouse cursor visible. However, what is most likely to happen is that although we notice it we still take the photographs to be “real”. It appears that the viewer is profoundly seduced by the image, by its perfection and hyperreality where it matters little now, in the middle of the maelstrom, its level of truth or reality, because what the individual really wants to have, additively, is a sense of pleasure, of the experience of being seduced.

Curiously, if the photographic work by Martínez Marí makes reference to the speed at which our worldly references are changing and the reality of how our paradigms are shifting, the moment he perceives and represents reality while still maintaining this perspective, we find that the drawings he produces considerably slow down our perception. The embroidery in his drawings looks like double stitch and evokes an almost ghostly appearance in the figures as the result of the threads and the shadows projected by them. As a result, his drawings offer the viewer a laid-back stance and a slower rhythm. These drawings (which in a certain sense are reminiscent of the narrative summary of a comic) pass by in slow motion, as if they were revealing to us a new way of perceiving ‘pause’ - looking, leaving our senses open if we want to better reveal the horizon of expectations displayed before our gaze. This is how the insular landscape is formed, a landscape in which none of its elements appear to have been purposefully planted there, occupying a fixed position in relation to one another. Better put, they look like elements in a state of permanent flight and in continuous movement, like an object that falls apart while it is dragged along by the currents, incapable of perceiving any sense of direction in them. At times it seems as if the island, its houses, people and palm trees want to travel, want to uproot and head out to sea just like the vessels around them, plowing slowly through an imaginary sea which is also in movement.

This image, of the island detaching itself from its foundations, of the island floating adrift without any direction, has been seen before in Cuban literature. *El Color de Verano*<sup>4</sup> by Reinaldo Arenas is the piece that is most vigorously developed by this image, but there are also others. It is worth mentioning another two given their emblematic status: *La Isla que Se Repite*<sup>5</sup> by Antonio Benítez Rojo and *Un Mapa de Sal*<sup>6</sup> by Iván de la Nuez. And, in this sense, within the framework of modern art, the works of Cruz Azaceta, KCHO and Sandra Ramos are essential. In all these pieces, the island deconstructs the last syntagma which unites them to any notion of dry land - that of belonging to a single location, being condemned to “inhabit” just one single space. Again, the utopian character of the island provides it with an ambivalence which is repeated: being at once an “unreal place” and the most wondrous space imaginable.

## II- Travel and shipwreck

Travel and the shipwreck. Inside the insular iconography of Martínez Marí, to say it somehow, there is another recurring element which catches my attention; the boat, and the embarkations which, in the artwork *Calipso*<sup>7</sup> (2011), share the metaphoric parallel of the journey and of the shipwreck. Sea travel is as old as time, it is the most common way to get to or from an island. In fact, until fairly recently in historical terms, it was the only link to dry land. In *Calipso*, and thanks to its title, the artist focuses our attention on the discursive intention behind the piece - the journey and shipwreck - if we keep in mind that in *Odyssey*, Calypso is nymph and queen of the island of Ogygia which receives Odysseus (Ulysses) after he finds himself shipwrecked.

In *Calipso*, Adrián Martínez Marí places us in front of a sunken vessel, or perhaps it would be more precise to say in front of a shipwrecked vessel because it is not submerged in the depths. It is a vessel that has been run aground, it is an isolated place, lonely and uninhabited; however, it is one in which alerts us to the proximity of dry land. Whether an island, or dry land, we cannot know, but we can sense the grip of land because it is a vessel that while half sunk is also afloat, or in other words it is both sea and land. It is a place which, from a metaphorical point of view, is much like an island given that if it too is to maintain a hold on the surface then it must have a secure grip below the ocean's surface. The boat is an artifact which transports human life and hanging over it, like the sword of Damocles, is the ever present threat of shipwreck, that is to say the ruin of this mobile place and the death of its inhabitants. The island, on the other hand, provides anchor for a human dwelling which invites you to imagine life in paradise following the shipwreck. And, in this relationship between the island, the journey, and the embarkation, has, since the time of Homer's *Odyssey* (the first epic narrative on this relationship), created an imaginary in which being adrift and being shipwrecked are inherent in the image of the journey, the island and paradise.

## III- I met the monster and savored its entrails

Upon reflecting on *Calipso* by Martínez Marí, on the contradictory status of the island, which on the one hand is an isolated place that is lost both on the sea's map and also in time and whose vegetation and climate conform to an image of paradise, and on the other, is a stop on a journey, surrounded by sea, and sky and air, a journey, the same journey which brings or removes life to this place, I realise that two journeys changed my own life. One took me to our old metropolis, Spain, and the other, to our most furious of enemies, the giant of “brutal and unsettled north” which was intent on destroying the revolution at any cost: The United States of America.

Disillusioned, or to be more precise, betrayed by those who instilled in me the ideals which they themselves did not believe in later on, I abandoned my communist island with a sweet taste in my mouth. If I had already been in the future (this is how our books described the communist society we were building) and it left a bitter taste in my mouth, then why continue sacrificing my present if I already knew what was to come.

4 *The Colour of Summer* by Reinaldo Arenas

5 *The Recurring Island* by Antonio Benítez

6 *A Map of Salt* by Iván de la Nuez

7 *Calypso* by Martínez Marí

I landed in capitalism with a mixture of euphoria and uncertainty. Euphoria because also brings with it hope, the desire to see and experience a new life, to experience new and unfamiliar pleasures, from a world which without asking me first, they had forbidden me. However, as time passed and with a few more years on the clock, that (revolutionary) optimism which I faced life with has disappeared. In communism things were straightforward, and we knew from our Marxist manuals who or what was bad, really bad. But now, things are no so clear, not so black and white; nothing is completely bad, and similarly nobody is completely good. It is as things have lost the sharpness of flavour they once had, as if the curiosity and desires I once had have been extinguished. At the speed at which life passes by, there is barely time to want to do the things that used to fill me with hope and excitement.

The day I landed in New York I was filled with a sense of curiosity and fear. I was finally in the monster and wanted to know its entrails. Sixteen years after having left Cuba, I was now in the Isle of Manhattan which was connected to the American continent by bridges. There I was, overwhelmed by the architecture and the furious pace of life of its inhabitants. All of my teenage years and part of my youth was spent listening to terrible things about this place, about the exploiting and retrograde society. Anyone in the street could be a victim of criminals or the police, from what they told us they were as corrupt as each other, so it should be best avoided. However, there in the Isle of Manhattan, miles from my other island, I felt full of energy and excitement.

I was in a bar on 5th Avenue and while having a few whiskeys, the drink of a badass as we would say in Cuba, I had my eyes on the TV screens that surrounded the wall above the bar. They were spitting out everything, from programmes on sports, fashion, nature, and food, etc. It was insane, I couldn't take in so many images at once, but there they were, overstimulating my senses at a speed I had never known before. I felt my inner self growing and I asked myself many things all at the same time as if I were a machine gun aiming at the same target. What to do with all the things I had missed, and equally everything I had gained? What use did I have for the things gained and lost? Where do I want to go in life? Is it worth getting anywhere in particular? I have tried everything, or almost everything that I have wanted to try, and on occasion, I feel that I am flying above life, that I get near, that I am on the verge of trying what I finally want from it. However, on other occasions, I feel its pulse, that its calls lie far away and are so foreign to me, as if something unfamiliar and unobtainable. Neither is the island, nor the continent, nor communism, nor capitalism; I do not know where to belong, I don't know where to find the place where I can finally be at peace with myself, and at peace with what I am. And I discover that I am nowhere, that I have progressed many miles and that many more lie ahead of me before I arrive (if time and life let one arrive). To arrive where? Those who have dared let themselves drift in this uncertainty without a compass through the pages I have written for them will have noticed that the feeling of not belonging to anywhere in particular, of always dreaming of a better place is a condition typical of an islander, and if you are left in any doubt then ask Tomas Moro and Francis Bacon.

Thinking of all this brings my mind back to Pause, the title of the exhibition by Adrián Martínez Marí. I wanted to pause and think, I wanted to take my time looking at the things around me and rediscover the pleasure of enjoying them as if they were really mine, I wanted to recuperate the hope and excited for the days in life. For the days. Life is made up of the days we pull memories from that help us to manage our lives. I wanted a life, perhaps to have emotions that were greater than what I have been, to have emotions and sensitivity beyond what I am now. But I know that this is not possible, because no matter where I am, where I live, be it the continent or an island, I will not be able to change anything. I left an island and I have not stopped drifting, and although I have seen the continent, I feel as though I am adrift.