La Libertad

The Ties that Bind

On Recent Work by Laura Huertas Millán

BY JESSE CUMMING

In *el pueblo*, the 2016 survey of Latin American film and video assembled for the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, curator Federico Windhausen notably included key works by foreign filmmakers that blurred positions of outsider vs. insider and what marks a film as "Latin American." The two American selections, Bruce Baillie's *Valentin de las Sierras* (1967) and Chick Strand's *Fake Fruit Factory* (1986), are separated by nearly 20 years, but share locations (Mexico), themes (lives lived around and through labour), aesthetic approaches (each is shot with a preponderance of tight close-ups that fragment the bodies of their subjects), and a self-conscious awareness of both the codes and the pitfalls of ethnographic documentary, particularly the lingering and ideologically loaded romanticism of Americans travelling "south of the border" to a less developed land.

While the filmmaker's status as a Franco-Colombian (albeit based in Paris) somewhat mitigates this latter concern, this same self-awareness of the artist-as-outsider permeates Laura Huertas Millán's careful and considered new film *La Libertad*, which enters into the lives of a family of rural artisans in Oaxaca. Produced out of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, *La Libertad* sees Huertas Millán returning once again to the questions of bonds and relationships—whether familial, economic, colonial, or artistic—that inform her three previous short-to-medium length films, *Journey to a Land Otherwise Known* (2011), *Aequador* (2012), and *Sol Negro* (2016).

Both *Journey* and *Aequador* were produced out of the French art and audiovisual research centre Le Fresnoy (where Huertas Millán completed her graduate studies), and each film sees the artist introducing a number of tensions: between the natural and the artificial world, between seen and unseen, and, most centrally, between colonizer and colonized. *Journey* open with the image of Lille's otherworldly Jardins des Plants greenhouse, a brutalist complex of concrete and glass, while a first-person voiceover recounts a colonial expedition's navigation of the Amazon: "I took notes on changes in the course of the river, I measured the meridian height of the sun, I also set up the barometer." This desire to monitor and dominate the untamed (or *sauvage*) world is mirrored through Huertas Millán's images of the conservatory's imposing exterior; after a slow tracking shot along its concrete underside, the rest of the film is shot entirely inside the building.

As the film moves through a series of tightly framed shots of lush tropical plants, the audio track weds ambient sounds of birds and

other jungle noises with the continued recitation of colonial-era texts. Through a carefully constructed montage of travel reports, racist histories, and other testimonials written by early colonizers on the quest for a "New World," Huertas Millán identifies a means of criticizing the colonial project using that project's own materials—a technique that proved equally effective in Narimane Mari's recent *Le fort des fous* (discussed by Jordan Cronk in *Cinema Scope* 72), which focused on the French colonial occupation of Algeria.

As she would in her follow-up *Aequador*, in *Journey* Huertas Millán utilizes certain elements of genre—here, the horror film—to buttress the idea of colonialism as the most monstrous of spectres. Over the course of *Journey*'s runtime the light gradually fades, with the latter half of the film taking place after nightfall; the dreamlike soundscape of birdsong is replaced by drums and the ongoing narration, which now takes a turn for the violent. At the midway point a human figure emerges, covered in camouflage, and stalks wordlessly through the conservatory, followed shortly thereafter by two mysterious, nightmarish figures dressed as a bat and a bird. The film ends with the camouflaged individual (credited only as "une amazon") rubbing a block of ice over its body, using the melting water to wash off the green, brown, and black paint and reveal the now individualized human figure beneath—a visual rejection of that colonial ideology which renders the human denizens of the region as little more than extensions of the untamed jungle.

In *Aequador*, Huertas Millán moves from horror to science fiction in her ongoing parsing of the colonial project, drawing implicit parallels between each endeavour's searching after "new worlds." As in *Journey* Huertas Millán utilizes citation, but limits it to an epigraph from fin-de-siècle Colombian poet José Asunción Silva's posthumously published novella *De sobremesa*—a grandly utopian vision of a Bogotá remade in the manner of Haussmann's Paris—that neatly encapsulates the question of power in such modernist developments. Though its full context remains unspoken in the film, Silva's invocation of Haussmann reminds one that the 19th-century prefect's transformation of Paris was in many ways a response to popular uprisings in the French capital, the widening of the avenues implemented not merely for aesthetic purposes but to hinder the construction of citizen-helmed barricades.

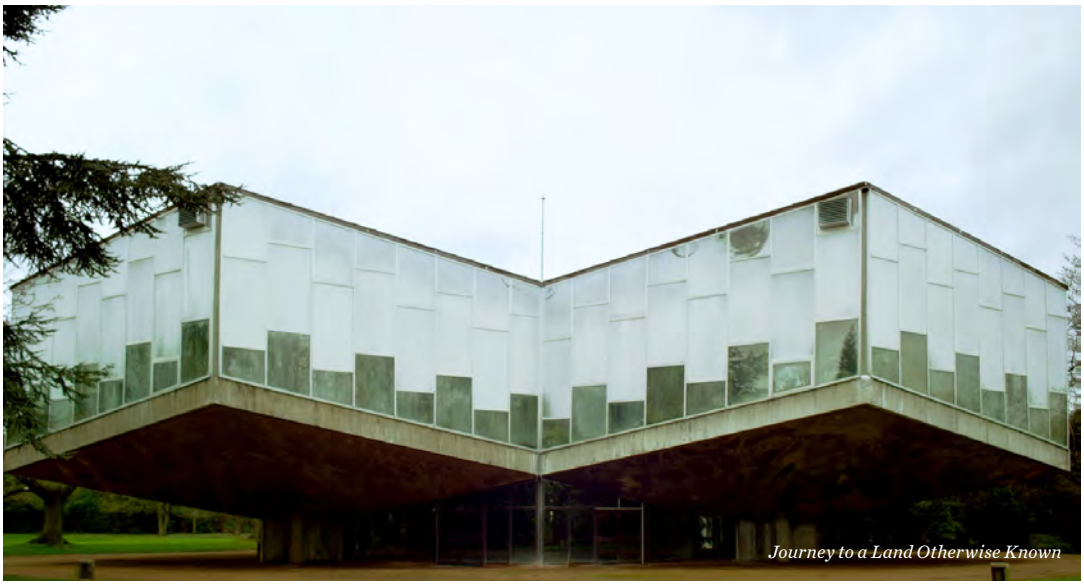
Extending backwards from this implicit critique of a top-down, deterministic mode of development, Huertas Millán takes us from an artificial jungle to the community of San Sebastián de los Lagos on the bank of the Amazon River in southeastern Colombia, offering wordless shots of the river and the adjacent foliage before incorporating fragmented glimpses of human figures and the local built environment (which includes a preponderance of elevated shacks). Then, within the space of the jungle, alongside ruins or homes or in the background of wide river shots, Huertas Millán begins to incorporate CGI images of alien, modernist buildings—most strikingly a grey, saucer-shaped structure that appears to hover over the trees that line the riverbanks. This startling juxtaposition of the natural and manmade recalls an additional quote from the Silva epigraph that opens the film, wherein Fernández imagines a mixing of cultures through the image of "bookshops that will combine on their shelves American and European books."

In the four-year gap between *Aequador* and *Sol Negro*, Huertas Millán began her practice-based Ph.D. studies at the Beaux-Arts de Paris and Ecole Normale Supérieure rue d'Ulm (SACRe program), with her studies in what she terms "ethnographic fictions" extending from her visiting fellowship at Harvard's SEL. Foregrounding the filmmaker's presence and the staged nature of the recreations, *Sol Negro* (along with *La Libertad*) constitutes part of that degree, and signals a continued interest in the artist's work about questions of ethnography, with Huertas Millán's approach evincing a fair amount of trepidation toward a historically fraught discipline.

Sol Negro—which "stars" Huertas Millán's aunt Antonia, along with the filmmaker and her mother (Antonia's sister), as fictionalized versions of themselves—is the closest of the artist's works to fiction proper, as it not only includes several sequences shot and edited according to conventional narrative form, but also a structure that resembles a standard (if elliptical) plot. In the first half of the film, we watch as Antonia, an opera singer and recovering drug addict, moves through a number of routines and encounters within her rehabilitation clinic: kinetic and near-abstract breathing exercises with a non-professional singer, testimonials in her Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and time spent in a communal space as her younger male peers freestyle (which is followed by an intimate encounter between Antonia and one of the young men). In most of these sequences the camerawork roams with a documentary-like intuition and spontaneity; these are punctuated by more formally reserved sequences of Huertas Millán and her mother clicking through Antonia's Facebook page and discussing old family photos, analyzing the disparity between the manicured and idealized self-representation that Antonia (and, by extension, almost anyone) displays online and the inner turmoil she struggles with. This dynamic is deepened by the inclusion of two fantastical opera sequences, in one of which a tearful Antonia—whom we earlier learned has become estranged from her son—is unable to sing the lyrics to Hoffman-Cherubini's *Medea*, a work about another woman who is (differently) unable to perform her role as a mother.

The film culminates in the two sisters preparing dinner, Huertas Millán shooting hands trimming chicken meat and the bubbling soup in close-up while the sisters' offscreen voices trade general banalities about food; during the dinner itself (shot in traditional narrative-film language), Antonia relates her experiences of regression in psychotherapy, and further expounds upon the familial histories of trauma and mental illness that had previously been broached between her sister and niece. Throughout *Sol Negro*, the bonds of family are seen to be as potentially crippling as they are sources of support and catharsis; perhaps tellingly, the family's seeming communion over a meal is followed by a final sequence where Antonia performs alone, isolated on a stage in an empty, dreamlike theatre.

In an interview with fellow Colombian-born filmmaker Lina Rodriguez, Huertas Millán located the origins of *Sol Negro* in her current geographical distance from her familial roots: "I [thought] about ethnographers, who tend to go to the most exotic places, and I thought that it could be interesting for me to try to go to the place that was the closest to me and at the same time [a place] I wanted



Journey to a Land Otherwise Known

to keep distant." Huertas Millán's foregrounding of the politics of representation and the ethnographic gaze, even in so obviously personal a film as *Sol Negro*, continues in *La Libertad*, which documents the Navarros, an Oaxaca artisan family consisting of matriarch Mariana, daughters Inés, Crispina, and Margarita, and son Gerardo. Each of the women practice weaving with the pre-Hispanic backstrap loom, and Huertas Millán also considers adjacent forms of creative production, including the family's cooking rituals, Gerardo's painting, and, by extension, Huertas Millán's own filmmaking.

As with Rouch, Huertas Millán's decision to portray events through staged or improvised scenes—and, à la Baillie and Strand, to complicate or frustrate the legibility of the ethnographic gaze through unconventional framing and editing—is not intended to overwrite the lived experiences of the subjects, but to zero in on the textures and details of those experiences, capturing them in a way that a more distant, observational, "neutral" gaze might not. *La Libertad* opens slowly, with hypnotic cuts between tightly framed and precisely composed shots of textiles, water, food, and fragmented body parts, emphasizing the sculptural element of the plastic arts. After this wordless montage, we hear Margarita's voice as she manipulates a bracelet in her hand, describing each of the individual figures woven into it. As the film progresses, its own formal structure is revealed to mimic the prospective life path of such an object: just as the intimacy and fine detail of the object's creation is followed by its subsequent entry into capitalistic systems of exchange and value and potential relocation to the space of the museum, so does the film progressively shift in both visual scale (from intent close-ups to medium shots) and physical environment (from the domestic space of the Navarros' dwelling to the white interiors of the institutions that display weavings similar to those created by the family).

The idea of "freedom" indicated in the title thus takes on several possible meanings throughout the film, as Huertas Millán questions to what extent the kind of artisanal cottage industry practiced by the Navarros can operate unconstrained by systems of value, be they capitalistic or artistic. At one point Crispina declares, "weaving...it is not an employment for me, it is not a job," characterizing her work as a vocation situated somewhere between a profession and a pastime. But this idealized conception of creation-as-freedom is shown to be conditional on other kinds of freedom, a forswearing of traditional social bonds: both Gerardo and Inés speak of the necessity of staying free of marriage for fear of how it would inhibit their artmaking. (Notably absent from the film is the family's fourth daughter Luciana, the only Navarro sibling to have married and started her own family.) Finally, and most broadly, the film approaches considerations of freedom from the burden of representation. In a filming journal for the project, Huertas Millán notes the recurring archetypes of women in ethnographic documentary, who stand for little more than seduction or procreation. By giving voice to each member of the Navarro family, Huertas Millán attempts to free her subjects from those lingering tropes that would risk subsuming their individuality under monolithic, homogenous designations.

It is here that *La Libertad*, and Huertas Millán's practice as a whole, might fit interestingly into Windhausen's curatorial investigation in *el pueblo,* particularly the historical and contemporary concepts of collectivity and unity. Both an "insider" with deep bonds in Latin America and an ethnographically trained outsider arriving from abroad to (re)approach Latin culture through the lens of continental ideas, historiographies, and philosophies, Huertas Millán remains cognizant of both the freedom which her "in-betweenness" grants her and the various constraints (familial, cultural, institutional) that accompany any such seeming liberty. This is not a deterministic view so much as a recognition that, while ties may bind, they need not strangle. In one of *La Libertad*'s scenes set in a museum space, a textiles expert speaks to visitors about shared weaving techniques present in both Iran and Mexico; searching for a term other than "influence" to account for this correspondence, something "lighter," she finally settles on "ties" or "relations." "How intense?" someone asks from the audience. "How strong?"