

Interview Regina Silveira _ Kevin Power

K.P.: You are now working on a project for the Palácio de Cristal a complex and dramatic space. What made you take this project on? What concepts did you toy with?

R.S.: The Palácio de Cristal is an ethereal building that feels like enormous receptacle of natural light, an enormous, transparent box penetrated by the luminosity of the sky, with no opaque elements other than the fine, open grid of the framework supporting the panes of glass. Creating works for this building was an incredible challenge not so much because the dimensions, for I have been working with projects for large spaces for a long time, but because it does not provide the opacity or fundamental supports for my usual type of propositions. During my different visits to the Palácio de Cristal to understand and get the feel of its spaces, I have measured architectural elements and have drawn on photocopies of the many photos I have taken of the building. One of my most frequent strategies to tame a building that is larger than life and overwhelmingly present, in terms of either its dimensions or other characteristics, consists of the simple tactic of drawing on photos in order to understand the scale and the presence necessary for my likely creations and avoid them being neutralised by the context.

I knew from the outset that the project should focus on creations arising from the Palácio de Cristal experience itself, the product of its spaces and luminosity: specific works that can be interpreted as being inseparable from the building and yet able to transform the architecture by grafts that alter its visuality and meanings.

At first I toyed with the possibility of conveying some earlier items that I thought were compatible with my exhibition plans to the spaces inside the Palácio de Cristal. I thought about works conceived of as polarities between light and shade, about projected images and the effects of duplicating reality visually. Some of them had been produced for “*Claraluz*” (Banco do Brasil Cultural Centre, 2003), an exhibition in which I also used the building- or rather its skylight- as a subject, and employed light and projections to construct a poetic discourse attempting to impregnate the entire building with its intangible images. I soon realised that it was not simply a matter of moving works from that exhibition to a new location but of revising the concepts, operating principles and strategies involved in the search for new solutions stemming directly from the architecture of the Palácio de Cristal.

Before finally setting out along this path, I explored the possibilities of a particular project, an ambient installation provisionally entitled *El Sueño de Velázquez*. This project was to occupy virtually all the horizontal axis of the floorplan of the Palácio, endowing an earlier series of installations – the *Desaparencias* begun in the 1990s – with continuity and expansion.

The new version for the Palácio de Cristal was to be a large-scale scenographic image with which I hoped to transform the empty, transparent spaces in the building into an ideal – and idealised – place in which to house the illusionist image of an immense painting studio. Spread out across the floor and upon several tall, white canvas supports stretched right out at an obtuse angle towards the sides of the building, the scene would consist of easels and other basic items of furniture typical of an artist’s studio.

Whereas I would situate shadows cut out of the image behind the stretched out canvas, any viewer entering the premises would be faced with a large drawing consisting of dotted lines (the geometric code for invisible things) with a highly accentuated perspective converging on the viewpoint situated a few metres from the entrance to the premises. In a manner almost imperceptible to the eye, due to the extension and anamorphic stretching of the image, this work sought the visuality of an apparition, almost as transparent as the building itself. I made simulations of this studio image and constructed digital models and a small cardboard mock-up.

Of the three items that finally comprised the project, *Quimera* is the one stemming most directly from its homonym in the “*Claraluz*” exhibition. This new *Quimera* casts a more all-enveloping shadow: it consists of a sort of black skin covering the complex structure of the Palace portico, including its panes of glass, balconies, columns and reliefs. After moving it around several times, I discovered that the location which reinforced the intrinsic meaning of this work best was the actual façade of the Palace, above the portico with columns. There a shadow could also feature a dark interval between the columns and create a link between the external and inside spaces alongside the entrance door. *Quimera* is a visual paradox consisting of the image of a switched-on light bulb projecting not light but a vast shadow in the form of a black drop. In place on the façade of the Palace this paradox could only duplicate its complexity since here it acts as an inverted logo, an out-of-place presence revealing itself to be impossible in the context of a building completely in the grasp of natural light.

The intention was for *Quimera* to be built upon the perfect conjunction of two very large back lights – one hung inside and the other outside the building – complemented by a shadow consisting of one fine, black film of vinyl to cover the panes of glass and another of silicon to cover the part of the portico made of cement and lime.

Transluz is an enormous image of the word LUZ (light), written in perspective. It consists of a cut-out cast of dark blue, adhesive filter to be applied to the panes of glass in the vault on the apse of the building. The technical and poetic solution of using a transparent cut-out is in response to the possibility and the desire for the outside light to go through the actual word designating it, thereby creating a circular equivalence between the word and the phenomenon that can make itself felt as a luminous accentuation of the transparent letters cast on the deep blue filter.

Although the blue filter might also have been expected to cause a bluish atmosphere inside the apse, the most specific visuality I intended for *Transluz* was not so much this colour-light effect as that of the transparent cut-out itself. I intended this cut-out to work as a sort of immaterial frame within which, at an unfathomable depth, the luminous quality of the sky, clouds, birds and anything that might cross that transparent interval can be seen. It is as if the gap for external space were a stage curtain revealing occasional aerial events above the Retiro Park in Madrid.

Memoriazul is the largest of the three works and is also the one needing the most trials and samples between conception and execution in order to confer the effectiveness of the envisaged configuration, its colours, tones and, above all, its effects. *Memoriazul* is the visual narrative of an imaginary happening in which all the panes of glass and iron framework of the vaults the full length of the horizontal axis of the Palacio de Cristal are broken. This fiction, frozen in two moments in time, was to poetically link what happened in the glass vaults to the splinters and fragments shown as photos in the image stuck on the concrete floor.

The image in *Memoriazul* was created on the basis of photos of the vaults which were in turn the raw material used to make a large-scale, digital collage in which the fragmented photos appear. This matrix/image is the “motif” of *Memoriazul*. I was able to make transparent images of it to stick onto the vaults and also the ones cut out of thick, opaque vinyl stuck to the floor. In order to make this “motif” fit the dimensions and characteristics of the building, particularly when calculating how to apply it to the vaults, it was essential to study all the available layouts in depth and to analyse the maps and plans of the panes, counting them over and over again. In *Memoriazul* it will be just as important to look upward to see the imitation stained-glass window made of broken panes, as to stroll about over the “tapestry” and experience the virtuality of the many, many fragments including bits of skies and clouds, apparently situated beneath the surface of the ground. My aim here is for the ground to act as a mirror and recollection of what has happened overhead.

I have called the entire project *Lumen* in order to emphasise that light is once again the axis of my poetic reflection and the very key to all language operations involved in my dialogue with the Palácio de Cristal architecture.

The association with light is also both an explanation and an anchor for the ephemeral nature of the intervention, because *Lumen* addresses the universe of meanings contributed by the ethereal properties of a building and the changing light passing through its spaces. The changing and temporary effects stemming from the interaction between this architecture and this light are replicated in the ephemeral nature of the works, which do not aspire to any permanence, despite my intention to make them seem irremediably inseparable from the building.

It is also important to note that in this type of project all the images are photographic and digital and designed for a type of execution that extrapolates the more conventional resources used in producing and assembling exhibitions. The *Lumen* execution technique belongs to the enlarged field of new means of producing images adapted to the large formats currently requires for a variety of applications and in extra-artistic spaces.

K.P.: The Palacio de Cristal project was created using a computer but then you have to transfer the images you get out of it to an extremely complex space. Are other design concept phases involved?

R.S.: Not everything in the project is strictly numerical and digital. In other words, the properties of light, colour and scale perceived by the eye cannot be controlled by the computer. There are real facets that look real, such as the back lights in Quimera, but there is also a visual perception involved that is affected by expectations and suppositions stemming from psychological and optical factors that are difficult to measure and quantify.

To cite just one example, the floor section in *Memoriazul* will need scale and colour adjustments related more to subjective spheres than to basic computer operations. That is why so many trials were necessary. Those adjustments would never be possible without using just your eye and your own experience to work out the subtle differences in size required between the upper and lower sections. The same occurs with the different tones and intensities that must be attributed to the printed images on the floor in order to compare the ones that are simply illuminated with the transparent ones that the outdoor light goes

through, as if they were stained-glass windows, in the roof. How do you make them look similar? How do you capture the optical size or the same effect that panes in the roof apparently have by relying on guestimates made at ground level? Is it possible for the representation on the ground to give an impression of floating because the image of the sky and clouds can be seen behind the photographed panes of glass and frameworks appearing in the tapestry beneath our feet?

All these questions need to be assessed sensitively and perceptively because they encompass concepts and interpretations beyond the computer's control. It should also be said that no computer simulations, even though they were indispensable to this project, can convey what can only be seen once the works are actually installed. The project includes a considerable unforeseeable factor arising from the effects of adding and overlapping lights and reflections. These effects will also include time and movement issues that may affect how the works are perceived because the light penetrating the building changes and shifts according to the time of day.