

"Nothing cannot exist forever". (Stephen Hawking)

"Everything you can imagine is real". (Pablo Picasso)

**By Isabel Corral**

### **CONTEXT BY WAY OF PRE-TEXT**

A few months back, Alfonso Crujera invited me to write a text for the catalogue of his retrospective exhibition organised by the government of the Canary Islands to honour his artistic career. I personally have always been convinced that context is a defining feature of creativity and thus that the personal history of the artist, in this case, bears an inevitable influence on his or her career, something suggested moreover in the title of the exhibition: Parallel Worlds. Besides, in my case, it is literally impossible for me to abstract the work of this "creator of images" as he defines himself from my experience of him as a personal friend, and thus I have made no attempt to dissect his work analytically from a theoretical or formal perspective but rather within my own contextual Crujera world-vision. He himself suggested much the same when he asked me to contribute. He said (and I remember well and his words have guided me), "There is nothing I would like more than for you to write something for me along the lines you did for our great friend José Miguel (Aceytuno) on the occasion of his exhibition." I remember thinking then what an honour, how grateful I felt. And now what responsibility I feel as I sit down to weave together these few words. My sense of panic, my desperate need to not fail a friend is all of a challenge.

That implicit trust that Alfonso deposited in me leads me now, with the best of all possible intentions, to chart in time our mutual history in a series of flashbacks that are permanently engraved in that labyrinth of archives that is my memory. We first met in 1984. in the summer of 1984 to be more specific, at the beginning of June. We were celebrating the World Planet Day and we were both standing in front of my installation called "Rubbish Bags" (La Bolsa de Basura) that led me to make so many friends on the island of Gran Canaria who have contributed enormously to my feeling completely "at home and at one" with the island, something I had only intuitively sensed up until then with little logical basis, but sensed nevertheless. Another important date was in 1986, when coinciding with one of my then-sporadic visits to the island, I helped him to move his house and studio to San Felipe, along with other friends of ours. I think that was when we cemented our friendship and what led me to follow his work that, for me, is intimately associated to that magic place.

So, and reiterating the quotes of Hawking and Picasso that introduce this text, I am going to make no attempt to make a formal analysis of my friend Alfonso Crujera's work, apologising to him if this should not fulfil his expectations of my contribution. I also apologise to all possible readers for my departure from the norm and humbly beg your pardon if you find my approach excessive. However, in my defence I will say that I am totally unapologetic in my most sincere acknowledgement of the immense value of the work of Alfonso and hope that the same will be evident in every word and phrase. I most specifically value his unequivocal positioning with respect to the value of landscape, and context, in the parallel worlds we momentarily inhabit.

## "PARALLEL WORLDS"... PEBBLES BABBLING IN MY MEMORY

She sat at the window, contemplating with satisfaction the place she had decided to make her own some time back. It was a simple building, that she called "the house", tucked away on a small fork in the lava-festooned path that wound down the deserted gulley. It was "her lookout" onto the world, a human window onto an empty space that allowed her to pretend that her solitude was no such thing. The tiny cove that she could glimpse from there gave all the appearance of being a mere pebble beach of every possible hue of red and black imaginable. The waves crashed to and fro on the rocks, transforming them into pebbles called "cantos" in the local language, perhaps on account of the babbling tunes they made that lulled her soul as she caressed their smooth surfaces every day on the cove at twilight. At times, she would be drawn to the beauty of one of these pebbles and would collect them in a kind of ritual re-collection. As she waited for the right moment to carry out the task that had brought her there, day after day she engaged her time trying to elucidate where exactly the babbling pebbles came from. Were they merely the remains of rocks from other parts of the island tossed ashore here? Or had they perhaps been dragged up from the deepest depths of the ocean, sculpted and worn by the waves until they finally cast them aside? Was the landscape a work in 3-D or a giant sculpture that was never to be finished? Or even perhaps the remains of other worlds? Had they perhaps been smoothed by human hands before being tossed into the waves?... *"The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind"*, she remembered that a poet called Bob Dylan had once said.

"The house" was an almost-square former agricultural storehouse, surrounded by the remains of a banana plantation that had previously been part of an enormous garden. Not a single element existed then that denoted the beauty and unique nature of that place. You could dream of how it had been, perhaps. Or you could re-collect the place as you had experienced it in its heyday, perhaps... Twilight was settling in. Just like every other day, there was nothing of any significance that could destroy the magic spell the view of the distant horizon wove on her, drawing her eyes to it. The fascination of the blue infinity that stretched before her allowed her to rediscover events that her memory had successfully tucked away. Life in that place moved slowly as if she were in a convent waiting for something...what, she did not know. The silence was only broken by her murmurs as she dared to voice her thoughts aloud, babble that mingled with the sounds of the babbling pebbles, that obeyed the coming and going of the tide. Nobody else lived there then. One day, after a magnificent dawn, she felt the creative urge to paint the house blue, inside and out, as if she could somehow make the walls transcend their material nature and protect her and others' souls.

She remembered again how she had run across some old photos, strangely in that other house in Barcelona that she had found thanks to an ad that said "House for loan designed for a pause in life". Besides the photos of a place that she hoped to get to know in full, she had found a manuscript and a painting hanging on one of the walls. She made some enquiries and on an impulse decided to close that house and make for the island where she presumed that the owner of these objects had lived at some point in time. Some time...? The situation was so weird that it made her shudder as she

began the voyage into the unknown. Perhaps it was all just a dream she thought as they announced the imminent landing. She stretched. No, it was no dream. She got off the plane. Her lungs filled with the humid smell of salt. Somebody was waiting there to take her up the north coast again. Again, she repeated, remembering that she had been there before. The first time had been purely by chance. Not so the second. It had been a long time ago, another world. So this was her destiny perhaps. But now, on the third visit to the island, the banana plantations had gone and cracks had appeared in the blue of the sea, as if it were a painting badly in need of preservation. Only the soil of the landscape seemed the same, a myriad of rocky ochres. They arrived. San Felipe she remembered was the name of the place.

There are times when we may wish that we had never cut adrift to voyage hopefully around the world. However that is not to be, as there are too many things that move us to hoist up our anchors and venture outside our safety zones. And so, we wander and wander around the perimeters of our mind, trapped in our lack of knowledge and in our lack of action, trapped perhaps in love ... or lack of love. Moving more positively forward in her reminiscences, she recalled her surprise when she saw that the access to the place was via the old coastal road. The motorway had disappeared. Some of the palm trees had survived. The plants and bushes carpeted the gully again. Before, although she had no idea how long before, there had been a hamlet on the seafront. There had been houses scattered here and there, some of them built in the attractive stark vernacular island-style of architecture that had succumbed likewise when agriculture was parked in favour of motorways. There was nothing left to denote the past efforts of working the land. Everything had been swallowed up by the collateral effects of civilisation and development. History only lives on in the stones, she thought. And among those stones were the giant blind pillars that had supported that ambiguous traffic over the years. Large stone walls showed that the place had been toiled over intensively in the past. Many say that inhabitants had opted for "destroying" their houses themselves rather than see the official bulldozers do their deed. The most optimistic, the dreamers, vowed to themselves that Paradise would be regained. As she thought of them, she applied the last brushstroke of blue to the house. And night had come. It was time.

Millions of tiny worlds illuminated the sky above as the moonlight poured into her tiny room. She took out the manuscript she had found. She opened and read the first page. it said "The vendor of paintings". It was written in pencil, a tool she was familiar with but that had been dropped from circulation and use many years before. What could that sentence mean, she wondered, and what relationship did it bear to the somewhat faded note that she had read on the back of the painting that hung on the wall of the house in Barcelona. What was it that had been written there, she remembered: *Sin título*. Serie *Strand*. 1991. Alfonso Crujera. The work was a sensitive piece of texturing of different shades of blue. It was as if the author had wanted to immortalise remains found along the coastline somewhere. She recalled remembering the blueness of the canvas. Not the vestiges of humans, it seemed but rather nature in the wild, possibly. The composition was very clear. The whole painting emanated from a shapeless series of brushstrokes and textures that gave the impression of dark rocks and circled outwards in open concentric circles that seemed to point in some direction,

a path perhaps... away or home? Was it perhaps the map of an old city or even a future city? Who knew? She made a mental note to go down the next day to walk along the coastline on the hunch that it was the first step on the way to understanding, without feeling clear about what she expected to discover... the author of the work? The *vendor of paintings*?

It was still dawning when she took to the path that wound down from the house to the coast. The majestic sea seemed to surge forward to meet her. It was not simple to walk along the coastline. The crashing of rocks made it complicated. But it was, at one and the same time, exhilarating, beautiful and primitive. Fire and water had forged that landscape over time and still ruled. She remembered the Strand. She listened to the babble of the stones that surrounded her, enveloped her when suddenly and disconcertingly she heard a human voice. She looked back to the path she had traced. An old man contemplated her, benevolently. She made her way toward him. She waved in greeting and he answered with one word. clear as a bell, that took her by surprise. Strand means shoreline, he said. And it was then that everything fell into place. The artist, Alfonso Crujera, must have lived somewhere similar to be able to fully interpret that peculiar landscape. How did that old man manage to communicate with her? And why did he know the name of the painting? She had always heard the theories that various parallel worlds exist simultaneously and that we flitted between them and had thought how absurd! But now, as she observed the old man more closely, she saw that although he looked very, very old, nevertheless, he was very very real. As he moved off out of her vision, she heard him say that the creator of the images had indeed lived there. What came of his paintings? What came of him? The only reply was total silence. But she knew from that day on that there were other *Strands* of ochre sand fixed to canvases with an infinite blue background.

She made her way back to the house and sat on a low wall that just allowed her to make out the horizon. She went back to reading the notebook. She turned over the page titled *The Vendor of Paintings* and the words on the next totally collapsed her understanding of that day's events. *Aras viteita, arasmasno, asserna, ara tangla, aernet ti, arss mequeina, arcamnac, aras trenia, asdrei, arasnía...* It was not "Latin" of the type that someone had once explained to her, spoken by the ancient tribes and the root of many of the signs that conformed the languages of the world, now fallen into disuse. The world had been taken over by one language. There was no need for translators. Everybody spoke the same or rather, everybody was equally silent. There was nothing new to say. However, she refused to lose hope. She was there precisely for that reason, to resist. So she decided that as *Strand* might well be related to certain natural shapes and colours, she should try to do something with these strange words, convinced that they too must be the titles of works created by the same artist whose agent, *The vendor of paintings* had managed to launch onto the art market that had once existed, she supposed.

All the words began with the same letter: a. That was at least something in itself, she thought. And most of them began with the same syllable "ara" or "aras" as in the Spanish word for "to plough". Could there be some link then to ploughing or

working the terrain? Could it be the symbolic expression of sowing a canvas with colours? She suddenly remembered having once heard the expression used in different ways, for example "... y en aras del bien común los compromisos se firmarán en un ara" (in order to further the common good, the commitments will be signed in a given sacred place). But nothing could be further removed from the reality of the situation. The common good no longer existed precisely because nothing of what had been committed to in writing was ever fulfilled. So she ruled out that way of reckoning and decided to concentrate on how these words would be if they were the names of paintings. She felt that they would be water colours, shaded to distinguish upper and lower keys, perhaps in two colours, one of which would inevitably be blue, the other reddish-ochre like the earth on that island. She imagined they would be symbolic landscapes, expressions of a certain state of mind of the artist. They would be incantations related to the rite of creation, another skill lost unfortunately in a world of con artists, marketing and technological conquest of manual work, that had turned its back on the likes of the magnificent architect, Le Corbusier who had predicated, "I prefer drawing to speaking. Drawing is quicker and affords less space for lies". Perhaps she thought, as she remembered the quote, she should fall silent but the silence of that dusk was such that not even the babble of the pebbles on the beach reached the house. Into the breach then, she decided.

*Aras viteita* suggested a tiny diluted blot in its upper section as if it were a house-boat to take refuge in. As for *Arasmasno*, perhaps the words *aras-mas-no... aras*, were like the circle or ring that the word represented, encircling all the pain, loss, frustration and pulse of life. Other nouns such as *Aras trenia* and even *Asdrei* could be represented in images like vessels cast adrift. She imagined them all to be signs and traces dancing on the glass of some window-pane. If these words had really been painted some time somewhere by a painter called Crujera, his work must surely be vast and as surprising as the titles. What could have become of him? Perhaps he had held exhibitions. How could she locate *the vendor of paintings* to get to the heart of the matter? Mulling that question in her head, she entered the house, stretched and closed her eyes. The next day, she would realise that night was designed for her to dream about what she was thinking. And she thought with the words of the other, as she almost always did. It had been Markus Gabriel, known as a new thinker of contemporary philosophy as it had been then, who had said "Art has uncontrollable power. For that reason, no person, no spectator nor artist is ever in a position to direct and control their destiny". A ray of sunshine made her half-open one eye and return to that strange reality that she had decided to inhabit for a while, isolated from the rest of the world.

She knew that in the city there was still a Museum, a place where they kept objects that someone had decreed to be treasures for humanity to enjoy. She would go there. It would perhaps be difficult to distinguish more *Strand* but there was always a chance to thereby corroborate if some visual sensations could be transformed into pictorial realities. Besides, if she went outside the comfort zone of that place, she might perhaps discover some vestige of the artist's workshop. Most probably, nothing remained of it. Most probably, he would have been one of the people who had decided to de-construct their house and take it elsewhere so that the

gulley could return to its primitive life as a wilderness. She was particularly interested in these facts that she could glimpse through the cracks in time... previous to the disaster, to the in-humanity. But as time seemed to be a jumble of knots, what was "before" slipped imperceptibly into the tangle of "now" and "now" into "much later", so it was of little import how long she might take to reach the city. She would take the *vendor of paintings* notebook with her. She had wanted to dwell on the pages containing the "a"s for the time being, convinced that the rhythm of her reading was something of a ritual or spell. She wound her way down the gulley path half hoping to meet up with the old man she had seen the day before. But that was not to be. There was nobody down on the coastline. The sea that day was far out and the "babble" of the pebbles was silenced, as if in awe of her arrival. As good a day as any for the crossing, she thought.

The sun was up almost at its zenith and the wind and waves had calmed making her walk along the coastline relatively little of a sacrifice. The layout of the land afforded her a whole catalogue of lava colours and textures from various different geological periods. Every now and then, a pool left behind by the waves offered her a refreshing low-tide dip. Dusk was drawing close. Soon the sun would set in for the day. Suddenly, the sky reddened and she feared falling into a chasm. She took a bottle of fresh water from her backpack laden down with pebbles sharpened by the waves into arrowheads, and made her way to a small raised platform. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. Suddenly, she no longer knew what reality surrounded her. However, one thing she knew to be certain. That coastline had produced many of Crujera's *Strands*. She would have to plough on a little to find some shelter for the night. This she found in an area of natural saltpans of great beauty. Night had not yet fallen and the salt offered a variety of silvers, pinks and mauves of indescribable magnificence, something that could only be captured in paint not words, a magic place where to spend the night, no doubt.

When it dawned, she saw how the saltpans had been unforgivably and regrettably ruined. There was a small building that she had used to shelter in, no doubt a storehouse. She ventured down to the rocks and discovered the low volcanic dykes the waves crashed against, and the hollows weathered out in them where the salt was left to slowly crystallise. The whole area appeared to be festooned with works of Nature and human hand, both from times immemorial. Along the stone wall, she found some parts that were neither volcanic nor had natural shapes. They appeared to be pieces of pottery that had been expressly scored with images, baked in the sun... or by some art (i)fficial flame, she mused to herself, playing with the words. She sat before the magnificent gala of the natural production of salt and opened the "*vendor of paintings*" notebook yet again. She flipped over a few blank pages without trying to understand the hiatus and came to a text that described in some detail that the *vendor* had commissioned an exhibition by Alfonso Crujera. Surprise, surprise, the author of the *Strands* himself. The selection of paintings to be shown in the Americas was to travel by boat. They were never to know the reason that led to the incomprehensible sinking of the ship off the coast of the island but knew for certain that the seabed was now the gallery for his *Obra solar* (Solar Series). And they presumed that it was such and so great the love that the artist had professed to this series that he could not deny

himself the pleasure of re-building the towers. pillars, spheres, sundials and gardens ... of clay branded with flames and with names of their own.

She went about selecting some of the remains. She imagined them growing into possible shapes and sizes. The small piece of clay she held in her hand that had originally been rectangular, with neat clean angles and that had been part of an enormous puzzle of similar pieces ordered over different heights, forming the *Torre de Vritra* (The G(r)lass Tower) that reached up into the heavens, far beyond where it was originally planned to soar. But it did. The limits of the imagination, like the confines of our worlds and universes, are eternally blurred, indistinct. She laid the piece aside and looked for another to re-create the beauty that she intuitively felt the original sculptures had possessed. A piece of a bowl in one of the pools drew her attention. It was some two metres away and she dashed forward to retrieve it. The lines scratched out on its surface could still be discerned under the sea-moss. It must have been semi-buried in some deep and distant place, she thought. It was clearly a piece of something. But of what? She had no idea. She could only imagine some archaic solid tubular shape, balanced like a totem pole. Suddenly she thought of what it must have been like to find shipwrecks with the remains of statues and pottery belonging to ancient civilisations. The boat of the *vendor of paintings* had been wrecked likewise, with its cargo of works of art. Although perhaps this was pure speculation on her part. Perhaps it had been the artist himself who threw his work into the sea so as to repeat the act of creation ad infinitum.

She went on scouring the area and collecting pieces that seemed to be of positive interest in reconstructing the work of that artist. She linked one idea to another and thought that it could be that these clay *solar disks* somehow resembled the circles that she recalled conformed the *Strand* she had had the opportunity to see in Barcelona. The sun began to paint the horizon red, casting a fiery glow on everything around her. She had been talking to herself for some time by then and spellbound by the fiery red streaks in the sky, she wondered aloud what the *gardens* of Crujera must have been like. And the sea replied from a nearby blowhole: "circular". Small paradises. Miniature versions of what the island had been, she imagined. She was sleepy. It would be hard work getting to the city tomorrow. She hoped to recognise it and felt sure she would, though they told her that fortunately some things had changed for the better. The city was less built up and had less cars moving around than before. It seemed to be more of a community. Healthier. As dawn came up, she slung her backpack full of "archaeological remains" over her shoulder and took to the coastal path again. But gradually the path became more and more complicated. The coastline that by then was sheer cliff had been weatherbeaten and large blocks of rock had been severed from the cliff-face and dragged out to sea like miniature island reflections of the mother island. After hours of walking, she was finally rewarded with a view of the Island. She could see the distinctive shape of "La Isleta" (as she remembered it was called) up ahead, surging from the sea and the volcanos and the isthmus that joined it to the immense bay of LPGC, the capital letters of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, the capital city. It was an image that was worthy of being etched on the memory forever.

The light wakes me and I open my eyes. I see that I am grasping a piece of shiny metal that I know to be a *Betyl*. It is one of those magic stones that they said rained down from the skies. I look around me and see that I had fallen asleep in the open air in the Parque de La Música, in a corner of the place known as El Rincón (the Corner), at the bottom of a gully that the citizens had, at long last, retrieved and habilitated toward cultural ends. I must have been dreaming, I guess, travelling through other times and other places. My cellphone says the date is the 20th November 2020. And an alarm reminds me that today is the inauguration of the exhibition of my good friend, Alfonso Crujera. But as I still have plenty of time, I decide to walk through the Parque de la Música and stop on one of its terraces, the one graced by Crujera's SOS. The work was designed to immortalise the anguish of part of humanity as the result of the disasters provoked by others. Crujera's SOS offers a new public space for us all to share. That evening, after the doors of La Regenta were opened, I relished in his work as a whole, on its variety. It was a long-awaited event. Many felt an urgent need to see just how creative the artist could be. I strolled past the etchings attentively and was surprised not to be reminded of the papers marked by the water from my dream passage.

I was particularly grateful for the series called *Sacred Place* because the title and the golden moondust brought my wandering through other worlds to a magic and magnificent end. Stephen Hawking once wisely said "Eternity is a long time especially toward the end". And we have come to the end, full-circle. All I have to add is that the original of this text of your parallel worlds in Spanish contains exactly 4,224 words. This is no coincidence but is rather due, as Douglas Adams was to point out in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, to the fact that the meaning of Life, the universe and everything, is 42. In other words, pure fiction, like almost everything in the universe of lost parallel worlds.