



ARTUR RAMON ESPAI D'ART

Giambattista Piranesi
Humberto Rivas

Etchings and photographs

30.01.20 - 24.04.20



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Veduta dell'avanzo del Castello, che prendendo una porzione dell'Acqua*, 1753, etching, 45.5 x 69 cm.



Humberto Rivas, *Belchite*, 1981, dry plate, 40 x 50 cm.

For me, to think about Piranesi implies an exercise in melancholy, a voyage to the past. I still remember one summer of my youth spent in Rome, in the Abbey of Saint Anselmo on the Aventine hill, when I was visiting an uncle who was the bursar there. I remember how, from the fountain of the Benedictine Monastery, one could see the sole building that Piranesi erected in his lifetime, Santa Maria del Priorato (Church of St. Mary of the Priory), in the Villa of the Knights of Malta. It was there that I first heard his name. A short time afterwards, my father hurriedly ran up the steps that separated the gallery from the offices at 23 Palla Street, his arms full of books of etchings that he had bought from a local second-hand bookshop. First editions of the *Vistas de Roma* (*Views of Rome*), the archaeological treatise *Della Magnificenza*, the complete series of the *Carceri* and the two columns, Trajan and Antonine, in a three-metre-long paper accordion formed of seven large sheets. Later, luck would have it, during a course on decorative arts in London, I came into contact with John Wilton-Ely, maximum expert on the artist, and I shifted my focus from the study of Derby porcelain, which was of little interest to me, in order to delve into the influence of Piranesi on the brothers Robert and James Adam. During the day, I felt myself to be disciple of Winton-Ely, and wished to know everything about Piranesi, while in the afternoons I would buy etchings from specialized antiquarians in Mayfair which, together with the ones which we already possessed, would conform the first exhibition we dedicated to him in the old gallery in 1990. Others followed — *Roma vista per Piranesi* (*Rome as seen by Piranesi*) (1992), *Piranesi clàssic* (*Classical Piranesi*) (2004), *Piranesi. Amor per Roma* (*Piranesi. Love for Rome*) (2006), *Piranesi-Milicua* (2011) — in the same premises and in museums such as that of Montserrat, where I was able to study the Monastery's graphic archive on the Venetian master and write *Els Piranesis de Montserrat* (*The Piranesis of Montserrat*) in 2008, a book-catalogue which is my modest contribution to the bibliography on Piranesi. Piranesi slipped into our lives like a ghost and we have never been able to free ourselves from his dense shadow or his spell. Now my sister, Monica Ramon, takes up the task and continues to explore the Piranesian world in contrast with one of the best contemporary photographers.

In this case, we will revisit Piranesi in our new gallery space and in relation with the enigmatic photographs by Humberto Rivas. Over and above any formal analogies which can be established between these two masters of artistic works in black and white on paper — etchings and photography or vice versa — there is a similar backdrop. The dreaminess of ruins, of time elapsed, of past lives wrapped in melancholy. Both artists move with poetic ease in the use of fragments to portray a border time where one world wanes and the other has yet to arrive.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (Mogliano di Mestre 1720 - Rome 1778) lived in the last echoes of the Rococo, but already fully belonged to the Neoclassic world and combined, as no other, *rocaille* with the capital. This bipolarity would lead him to defend, with vehement romanticism, classical tenets on such serious matters as the origin of Classical Antiquity. From today's perspective, we consider his arguments comical in situating the first origins of the world in Rome, and so negating, in one fell swoop, the existence of the Etruscans and especially of the Greeks.

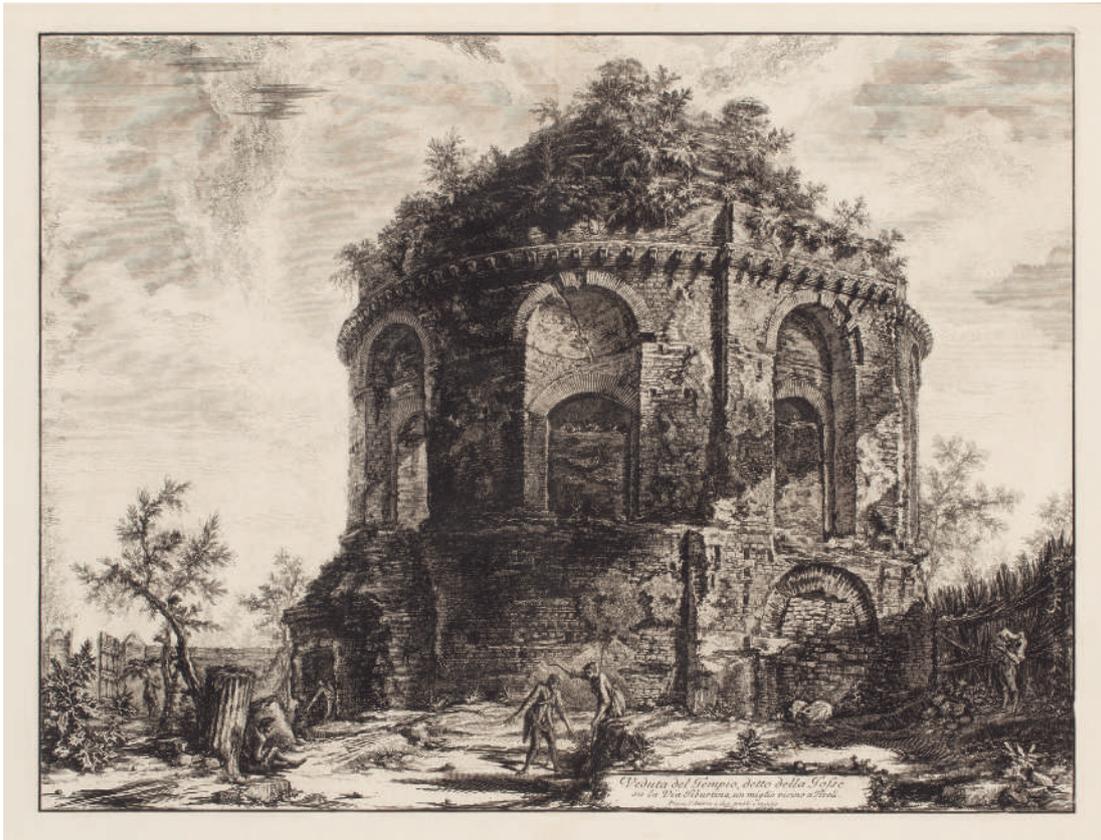
It was with an almost romantic fever enveloped in opium smoke that Piranesi did not cease to work tirelessly, scratching the copper plate with his burin to raise ink castles on laid paper. He was a titan who elaborated a cartography, an atlas such as we could recently see in the monographic exhibit dedicated to him by the National Library in Madrid. His *Vistas de Roma* (*Views of*

Rome) were published as postcards for the grandtouristas to take home as souvenirs much as we now today buy magnets for the refrigerator. Some people who only knew Rome through those images could have been frustrated to contrast the engraved ideal with the crude reality and realise that Piranesi exaggerated scale in order to accentuate the grandiosity of the architecture and monuments of the city on the Tiber. When we contemplate any of Piranesi's Roman views, the people are the size of ants and vegetation grows tangled in old, abandoned buildings which are as imposing as giants. Piranesi almost always exaggerates, but from his black mind — according to the felicitous tittle by Marguerite Yourcenar —, black, yes, and fertile, spring forth forms that narrate his present with an eye on the rear-view mirror of the past. I believe that what fascinates us today about Piranesi is this juxtaposition of time that crystallises in his work and makes it eternal, timeless. A similar effect is created by the photographs by Humberto Rivas, which are portraits of buildings without human presence, objects touched by light. Piranesi also knew how to play with the ink and the white of the paper to illuminate his views and offer to us chiaroscuro landscapes as only Rembrandt, and later Fortuny, were able to achieve. It is a wonderful idea to exhibit them together.

Artur Ramon



Humberto Rivas, *Lleida*, 2009, dry plate, 60 x 80 cm.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Veduta del Tempio detto della Tosse su la via Tiburtina*, 1763, etching, 44.5 x 57.5 cm.



Humberto Rivas, *Granollers*, 1983, dry plate, 35 x 45.5 cm.



Humberto Rivas, *ST*, 1979, dry plate, 35.5 x 35.5 cm.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Dimostrazioni dell'Emissario del Lago Albano*, 1764, etching, 41.2 x 56 cm.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Veduta del Piedestallo dell'Apoteosi Antonio Pio*, 1774-1779, etching, 48.5 x 69.8 cm.



Humberto Rivas, *Granollers*, 1983, dry plate, 36 x 46 cm.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Rovine delle Terme Antoniniane*, 1765, etching, 40 x 70 cm.



Humberto Rivas, *Cabo de Gata*, 2001, dry plate, 70 x 90 cm.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Humberto Rivas: artists ahead of their time

José A. Aristizábal

Romantic expression is the axis that maintains the works of Piranesi and Rivas in orbit around each other. Romanticism marked the beginning of conceptualising beauty from another position, with other values. Those aesthetic qualities the Renaissance deemed contrary to beauty, such as chaos, darkness, ugliness, disproportion, imperfection or irrationality, starting with Romanticism were included within the aesthetic. All that which was not clearly and luminously discerned, but rather mysterious and dark.

One of the clearest influences on Romantic painting can be found in the etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Even though his intentions were not romantic, he offered compositional elements to achieve an image expressing sentiments seeped in tragedy and melancholy, symptomatic of the Romantic mind. Piranesi, interested in representing the finds arising from the Roman ruins, expressed a very personal vision, in which the temples appeared as vestiges, with broken, twisted and tortuous forms. His etchings showed scenes where humans appeared as miniscule forms absorbed by an unknown world, distant, and yet grandiose and primal. After Piranesi, Roman, Greek or Etruscan ruins were seen from a grandiose perspective, but also from that of the obsolescence inherent in all civilizations. As if all splendour contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The fleetingness of time and the inevitability of death. The ruins were the proof of the transience of things, while presenting a contradictory scene: humankind, with all their ingenuity, appears as part of nature yet at the same time is devoured by it.

The awareness of this contradiction, the essence of the Romantic mind, has been called the wound of consciousness by Rafael Argullol, or a tragic clairvoyance.

In Rivas' landscapes, we can see this same interest. Not only in its ruins, where cracks appear in the walls, the creeping vines and overgrown vegetation; but also in the photographs which represent abandoned factories and street corners, walled up windows and doors, also dominated by this contradic-

tory and unsettling harmony in which time has put everything in its place. Whether at night, at twilight or at dawn, with the streetlights lit or in the reflections in the water, his photographs of landscapes transmit the force felt by the Romantic artist, for whom night is not absence but is rather strength, is presence. His work, reflection of his inner world, reveals his interest for the unexplainable, the uncertain and the mysterious. What is more, mystery, the motif of his introspection, is practically converted into the theme itself of his work.

If we refer to the fact that, initially, the etchings by Piranesi were produced with the idea of selling them to the *grandturisti* who sought to take a souvenir of Rome with them; and that, in the case of Rivas, the photographs arose from a concrete place and time in which light was reflected on the negative, we could say that the act of creation by both artists reflected the "real" world. However, both ended up representing a fictional world. Yet, it was not a fiction situated in a world of fantasy, but rather in close relationship with their personal conditions, which is to say, in harmony with their manner of seeing themselves. The fiction was a projection of a profound desire. In the case of Piranesi, product of a crossroads in history whereby he personally assumed the need to grant Rome the position of supremacy of Antiquity, and by extension, of all of eternity; in the case of Rivas as an outlet for an extremely hermetic and fragile personality, in which his artistic creation gave voice to his own pain.

In both artists, this profound desire starts with a search for their origins. Piranesi looks to the archaeological ruins that emerge of the Eternal City, and Rivas, after searching for the Buenos Aires of his childhood, which, lost in his memory, he found in the abandoned factories of the Poblenou neighbourhood in Barcelona. This shows us that, ultimately, both artists lived the act of creation as an inner journey towards a place they recognized as inherent and primal, and towards which they moved in order to resolve their immediate present.

If we look simultaneously at Piranesi's views of Rome, and at Rivas' streets and buildings of the

periphery of Barcelona; the landscapes, which in this case offer a geographical description, archaeological — in the case of Piranesi — and even climatological of the territory; they show at the same time, clearly, the sensation of a place drawn from the unconscious. It is the image of a dream, which is transmitted to the subconscious of the viewer, as a specific internal experience.

In this sense, the parallelism between these two artists transcends the formal relation of the ruins and obliges us to ask ourselves how they gave form to this dreamed and primal place. In Piranesi, one of these compositional characteristics can be found in what is known as the “scena per angolo”. It is the handling of perspective in which one vanishing point gives rise to another two, resulting in an image which makes sense from multiple points of view. The most evident examples can be found in his «carceri» done between 1745 and 1750. As regards Rivas, it is evident the use he makes of corners to resolve his compositions. He arrived at this recourse in his first photographs at the beginning of the 1970s and maintained it through his last works in the decade of the 2000s. While the «scena per angolo» allowed Piranesi to conceive a wide space that gave the impression of being transitable, a sort of augmented reality; in Rivas’ work, the corners create the feeling that there is something hidden on the other side, which we cannot see but can sense lurking there.

Another characteristic is the manner both artists represent the human figure. In Piranesi, in order to make the grandiose character of the architecture stand out, the human figure is miniscule. In Rivas, the human figure is only present in the sensation provoked by its absence. In this way, we can realise how they manipulate the landscape, Piranesi, in the juxtaposition of ruins and new buildings, organised the composition in a magistral way, in which different epochs configure a scene that is as real as it is fictional. As regards Rivas, the manipula-

tion he performs on the landscape is done through the technique of double exposition. Rivas took two photographs on the same negative without moving the camera the slightest, a first one slightly underexposed, taken with more sunlight, and a second one with the diaphragm more open, in order to capture the artificial lights, such as the street lamps lit up. With this technique, he achieved the representation of the location in twilight, in which it was possible to recognize the smallest details which would have been lost in a single shot. The singularity is that, although the place photographed existed, it could not be appreciated as it was presented in the photograph.

In the work of Piranesi, we also see a consciousness of light, for example, in the manner he accentuated the shadows in the foreground in order to direct the viewer to a sort of desired place. These shadows produce the feeling of looking through a telescope, which literally would mean “tele-scope” meaning to experience for the first time the impression or sensation of something that is located at a great distance. This gives rise to the sensation of wonder and discovery that he sought to create with his etchings.

These qualities which we have briefly treated with the idea of showing the interest of both artists to create an imaginary place, bring us to an aspect which would perhaps require a more profound reflection and which consolidates again the merit of this exhibition in bringing together these two artists, the fact that both Piranesi and Rivas were artisans. They both dominated their craft to the point that they transcended the conventional idea of representation, using its expressive possibilities. Piranesi and Rivas, from what was considered in their time minor art — etching and photography — created Art with a capital A. Both, without reneging their identities as engraver and photographer, were true artists beyond their time.

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Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Veduta degli avanzi del Foro di Nerva*, etching, 38.5 x 61.5 cm.



Humberto Rivas, *ST (Barcelona)*, 1980, dry plate, 26 x 33 cm.

Cover page: Humberto Rivas, *Belchite* (fragment), 1981, dry plate, 40 x 50 cm.

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