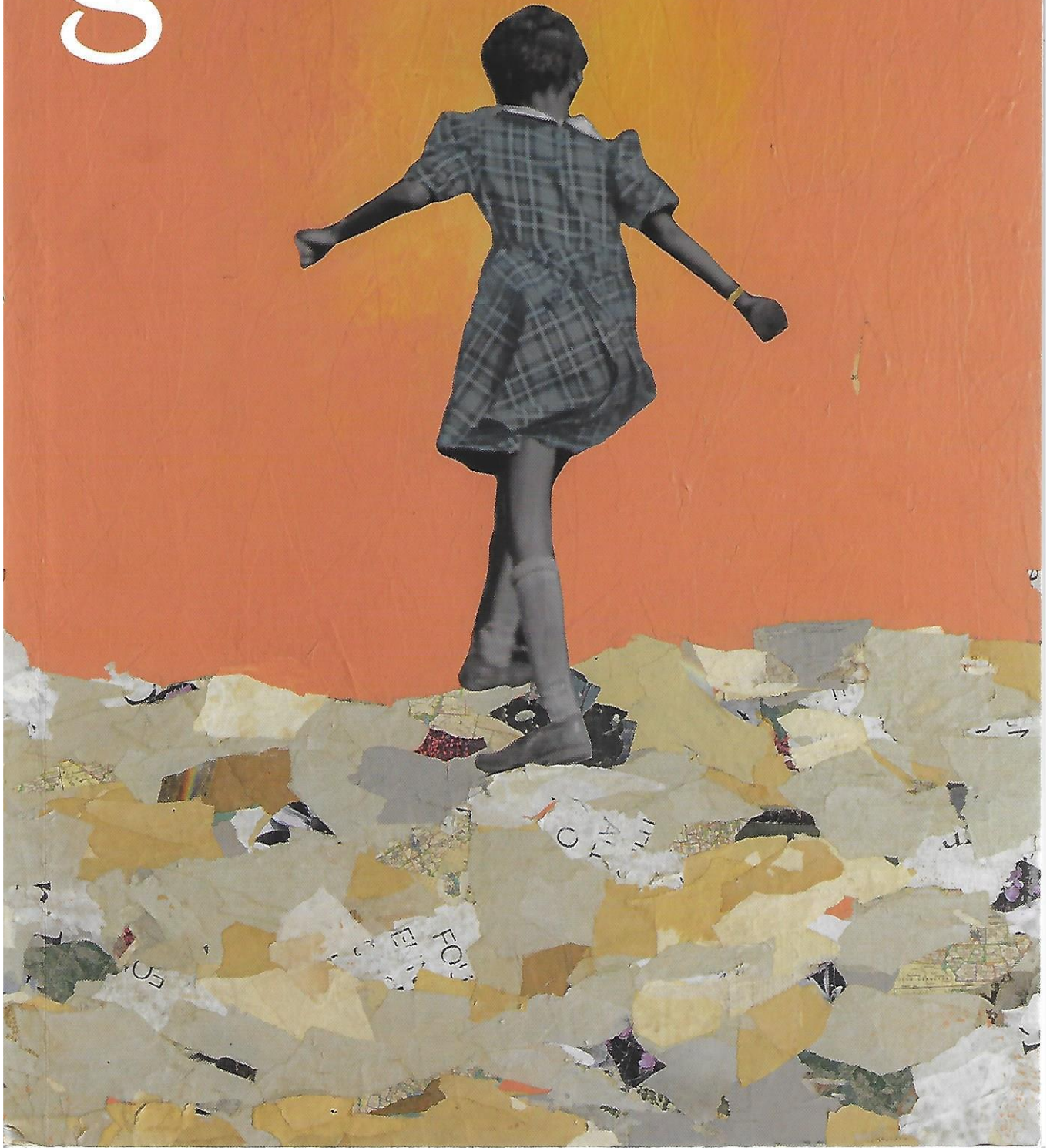


A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

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Inés Verdugo: The House Disappears

Memory is not only a remembrance, but the presence of a past that has been lost irredeemably. The house disappears and when we try to capture a remembrance of it, it also fades, lost forever.¹

—Inés Verdugo, *Desarraigo*, 2018

House like an engine that churns and stalls.

House with skin and hair for walls.

House the seasons singe and douse.

House that believes it is not a house.²

—Tracy K. Smith, from “Ash,” 2015

In her video *Arraigo* (2017), Inés Verdugo models a series of physical movements within three-dimensional digital models of dollhouse-like frames. Her body is exactly the scale to fill the entire interior of each house; each house barely contains her (Fig. 1). She curls into a ball, rolls into herself, makes angles with her elbows and knees: her body crowds to the edge of each frame. In a series of prints from the same year, *Estar ahí* (Fig. 2), Verdugo contorts her body within blueprints of houses, reiterating the gesture from *Arraigo*. She pushes against walls, hunches down with the ceiling pressing upon her neck. The feeling of claustrophobia is met by the contained energy in her body, the forceful push back against the space that constricts her.

A year later, Verdugo produced a site-specific installation titled *Desarraigo* at Galería Sol del Río in Guatemala City (Fig. 3). From rooted (*arraigo*) to unrooted (*desarraigo*) in a year, this piece continues her investigation of what home means in her hometown. Dismantling her childhood dollhouse with precision, Verdugo again describes home as a frame within which the body struggles. She hangs the broken-apart pieces of the house on cords dangling from the ceiling, spreading it

This text is written in celebration of Susan, who first taught me about the way to read and build one's own home. It is dedicated to the memory of Yvonne & the artists who made a home with her from 2016-2020.

¹“La memoria no es solamente un recuerdo, sino la presencia de un pasado que se ha perdido sin remedio. La casa desaparece y cuando lo hace el recuerdo de ella también se desvanece, perdiéndola para siempre.” Artist statement, *inesverdugo.com*. Trans. by the author.

²Tracy K. Smith, “Ash,” *The New Yorker* (Nov. 23, 2015).

across the gallery. The dollhouse seems to be paused mid-explosion, its walls placed to parallel the structural principles of the gallery (itself a former house). Each piece of the dollhouse has been covered in a viscous layer of resin, which seems to both hold it together and give it a skin. "I have measured my body in comparison with this house," Verdugo writes. "I have hidden myself inside it. I have recorded all of the postures that my body takes on within this space. I have left it flying in the air, hooked to a crane with the desire to let it fall, without allowing it to."³

Writing in the catalog for the 2017 exhibition *Home—So Different, So Appealing*, Chon Noriega describes home as a central site for understanding the self and the world around it:

It is an unquestioned premise: 'I am home.' To say 'I am home' is to be at home and to be the home itself; it is to speak 'on the threshold of being' within the world. *Habito ergo sum*. Within that premise is the deeply held secret that our being-in-place, the concreteness of our being in the world, is on shaky ground.

The home, he continues, "constitutes the archive from which one may tell a counterhistory that is concerned with the wreckage, informal places, and feelings produced by history."⁴

Included in *Home*, Daniel Joseph Martinez's *The House America Built* (2004/2017) layers a series of U.S.-American home archetypes with heavy-handed citational irony: Martinez builds a scale model of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's Montana cabin (based on Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond home), paints it the colors of Martha Stewart's 2017 palette of "living paint colors," and then cuts it into four parts, in a wily nod to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974). At the time of its making, both Kaczynski and Stewart were in prison—along with 2.3 million other U.S.-Americans—making prison, actually, the most widespread and uniform style of American "home."⁵ The conflation of the iconic "American" homes signals a broader political philosophy with which the U.S. imagines—and enforces—a national domestic space.

³ Desarraigo, 2018. "Se podría decir que esta casa ha traspasado los elementos simbólicos de su arquitectura y se ha convertido en el objeto que me ayuda a crear un puente entre lo real y lo imaginario. . . . He medido mi cuerpo en comparación con esta casa. Me he escondido dentro de ella. He registrado todas las posturas que mi cuerpo adquiere dentro de este espacio. La he dejado volar por el aire enganchada de una grúa con el deseo de dejarla caer sin lograrlo." Artist statement, inesverdugo.com. Trans. by the author

⁴ Noriega, Chon. "To Dwell on This Matrix of Places," in *Home—So Different, So Appealing* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017): 25.

⁵ Noriega, Chon, with Mari Carmen Ramírez and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, *Home—So Different, So Appealing* (exh. cat.). Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017.

If dwelling, a la Heidegger via Noriega, is the way in which we exist on the earth, our existence (or state of becoming) is also accompanied by objects. “Dwelling,” Heidegger writes, “is always a staying with things,” and here he signals the participation, perhaps even animism, of objects in our constructions of the self.⁶ For the 2014 Paiz Biennial, Verdugo installed *Acumulación en secreto*, an inventory of 80 personal objects she collected since 1990. Alongside the objects, she wrote a numbered list in pencil on the gallery wall. In the center of the room, she placed domestic furniture: a clothes rack, a shelf, a low bench. As she delivered each individual object to the shelves, she erased its name from the list. “The action consisted of showing and abandoning each object,” she writes. The piece obliquely recognizes collection logics that remove cultural objects from their homes: in this case, the artist herself pulls the objects from their domestic context, effectively enacting their erasure. And now we see one way in which *Arraigo* disorients: there are no objects inside Verdugo’s model houses.

Verdugo studied art education in Madrid, but perhaps her most formative training in visual art came during weekly gatherings hosted by Raúl Torres in his apartment in Zone 1, every Friday night for just over two years, beginning in 2010. With friends Rolando Madrid and Diego Sagastume, he named the gathering Espacio 556 and here, a group of eight artists and designers brought new work and installed it around 5 pm, on the walls (or other spaces) of the house. From 7 pm until the early hours of the morning, the group would offer critiques of each work, often inviting academic visitors to join the group and offer their observations, too.⁷ For Verdugo, this was the space in which she began to understand the work she did as an arts educator as something more than therapy. She describes Torres as a fundamental figure in the city’s artistic development, “First for opening the doors to his home for such a long time,” she says. “And then, for doing this in a way that was so loving and kind. He allowed us to grow past the border of our artistic doubts and struggles by letting us make a whole class of proposals in his house.”⁸

If Raúl’s home was a formative site, its brutal ending is one that also marks Verdugo’s work: in April 2016, Raúl was murdered in his home and his body was

⁶ Heidegger, M., (1971). “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (Hofstadter, A., Trans.), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper & Row.

⁷ For more about Space 556, see: <https://www.prensalibre.com/revista-d/espacio-556-un-ejercicio-plural-de-arte-contemporaneo-en-guatemala/>

⁸ Ibid. “Verdugo recuerda a Torres como una parte fundamental de Espacio 556. “Primero, por abrir por tanto tiempo las puertas de su hogar. Y luego, por hacerlo de una manera muy cariñosa y sincera. Permitted crecer la frontera de nuestras inquietudes artísticas al dejarnos hacer toda clase de propuestas en su casa. No olvidó la ocasión en que se abrieron zanjias en el piso para una pieza que involucraba el uso de llamas. Él, siendo tan creativo, construyó el mecanismo para utilizar correctamente el fuego.” Trans. by the author.

disappeared. We see the lingering traumatic loss as Verdugo explores the dissolution, dissection, and explosion of the house and its resulting dissolving of the self. The self is not safe in the house, her work observes, over and over again. In 2016, she cuts a doll house into small squares in a work she titles *Desplazamiento*. She then stacks the tiles of the destroyed house in small piles, binds them together with ribbon, and installs them on the floor. The piece, she writes, “shows the absence, the destruction, the collapse of the house. It makes visible the power of the object and the deterioration of the spaces that we inhabit. Fifty-six pieces in resin speak about accumulated memories from the past, found within a disorganized memory. Pieces that are direct copies of this house, where the important thing is the permanence of the past brought into the broken present.”⁹

In the fall of 2016, Verdugo worked with curator Belia de Vico to develop a site-specific project titled *Asilo*.¹⁰ Together, they coordinated the use of an empty house in Zone 2, which was being converted into a women’s shelter for victims of abuse. Throughout the building, Verdugo made sculptural interventions in its small dormitory-style rooms, central kitchen, and laundry (Figs. 4-5). Using packing foam and discarded construction materials, she created piles and rolls of things, some of them packed into wall-mounted vase holders or stacked on cupboards. One pile of materials—a trophy, a gun, a lampshade, a wig, a wicker basket, a telephone cord, bits of rebar and fabric—is wrapped in thick foam, held together with twine. On the twin-size mattresses, she layered sheets covered in drawings of house structures and domestic schematics. In one room, the fabric drawings include only statements from her interviews with neighborhood women, about their aspirations and dreams, the reasons they stay in family situations. Verdugo shows me her sketch books, which include extensive observations and drawings. She cuts into the pages, turning the books into sculptures themselves. On one page, she has written, “The collection has the emptiness of the future, in order to capture an identity that hasn’t yet arrived. The objects are only a constant searching.”¹¹

⁹ From the artist’s website. “Desarraigo muestra la ausencia, la destrucción, el derrumbe de la casa. Haciendo visible el poder del objeto y el deterioro de los espacios que habitamos. Cincuenta y seis piezas en resina hablan sobre recuerdos acumulados del pasado encontrados dentro de una memoria desorganizada. Piezas que son copias directas de esa casa donde lo que importa es la permanencia del pasado traído a un presente roto.” Trans. by the author.

¹⁰ Belia de Vico is a Spanish curator and cultural organizer who founded the influential project Contexto in the early 1990s in Guatemala City; Contexto commissioned major, historically significant projects by artists such as Regina José Galindo and Jorge De León. It also served as a cultural center for an underserved community of children, connecting them with Guatemala’s contemporary artists. De Vico was also responsible for bringing numerous artists, particularly from Mexico City, to offer workshops and lectures in the mid-1990s, facilitating an important (and understudied) connection between these two places. After a long hiatus, Contexto re-started with *Asilo*, in a series of site-specific projects de Vico intended to commission throughout the city; the subsequent projects were never realized.

¹¹ “La colección tiene el vacío del futuro capturar una identidad q no ha llegado. Los objetos solo son una constante búsqueda.” Artist sketch book. Trans. by the author.

In her essay for *Asilo*, Guatemala City-based curator and critic Rosina Cazali writes:

As in the somatic disciplines—the field of study of the perception of the body in first person, from the depths of each individual—the work of Inés Verdugo reveals itself to us as an invitation to measure, calculate, sum up, subtract, multiply and divide with our own bodies, this extremely symbolic space, this refuge filled with contradictions, that both calls us and repels us.¹²

This emphasis upon Verdugo's work as measurement, however, disregards a salient aspect of her observations: there is nothing in *stasis* about the making or inhabitation of a home. Following Heidegger's association of building with being, the process of "home" is one in constant metamorphosis, as fragile as it is changing. "The association of home with familiarity which allows strangeness to be associated with migration (that is, to be located beyond the walls of the home) is problematic," cultural theorist Sara Ahmed writes, adding:

There is already strangeness and movement within the home itself. It is not simply a question then of those who stay at home, and those who leave, *as if these two different trajectories simply lead people to different places*. Rather, 'homes' always involve encounters between those who stay, those who arrive and those who leave. There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation.¹³

When I meet with Verdugo to plan her participation in the 21 Paiz Biennial, she has sketched out a project she is calling *Dulce hogar*, a structure made entirely of blocks of brown sugar, *panela* (Fig. 6). The piece is beautiful in its straightforward bitterness: a house built of sugar will melt away under the rainy season skies, leaving its structural support and its sticky remains, its title pointing to the cultural fetish of home. While this fetish is not unique to Guatemala, it is widely evident in political discourse around the Cicig (the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala) during this time. The organization is investigating charges of corruption against then-president Jimmy Morales and, in a swift

¹² "Como sucede en la disciplina llamada somática—el campo que estudia la percepción del cuerpo en primera persona, desde el interior de cada individuo—la obra de Inés Verdugo se nos revela como una invitación a medir, calcular, sumar, restar, multiplicar y dividir con nuestros propios cuerpos, ese espacio extremadamente simbólico, ese refugio lleno de contradicciones, que nos llama y nos repele." Rosina Cazali, exhibition text for *Asilo*.

¹³ Ahmed, S., (1999), "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2 (3): 340.

counterattack, Morales declares the U.N.-backed organization unwelcome in the country. While defending his illegal decision, Morales situates the removal of Cicig within a broader discourse about heterosexual marriage—one nationally expedient way of defining home.¹⁴ “Guatemala and our government believe in life, the family based in marriage between a man and a woman. We believe in and want free elections, without interference,” Morales proclaims, while tanks and anti-riot police line the streets around the national congress.¹⁵ With a wink to his conservative Catholic supporters, Morales aligned the vote against Cicig with a review of Initiative 5272, strengthening penalties for women who have abortions, prohibiting the teaching of sexual diversity in public schools, and vetoing marriage equality. Journalist Alberto Pradilla writes, “The sectors affiliated with the president are trying to locate the debate in ideological terms that transcend the anticorruption fight...” Foremost among these ideological terms is a shared sense of what constitutes an acceptable home, defined through heteronormativity and the destruction of reproductive healthcare.¹⁶ Home, as politicians in the U.S. also know, is the quickest metaphor to use when stripping citizens of their rights.

In a 1992 lecture titled “The World and the Home,” Homi Bhabha describes something he calls “unhomely,” from the German *unheimlich*. A moment in which the world invades the home, the unhomely makes visible the porous boundary between intimacy and political life. “The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence,” Bhabha writes.¹⁷ Thinking about Nadine Gordimer’s novel *My Son’s Story* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Bhabha uses examples of the home space in each to show an overlap between outside and inside, a disorienting violation of the sacredness of home that illuminates a larger lived reality under violent social and political regimes (apartheid and slavery, respectively): “In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes

¹⁴ The Associated Press, “Guatemala’s President Shuts Down Anti-Corruption Commission Backed by U.N.,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/americas/guatemala-corruption-commission-morales.html>

¹⁵ For excerpts from Morales’s speech, see Alberto Pradilla, “Morales cierra la puerta a la Cicig y amaga con autogolpe de Estado, con música de mariachis al fondo,” *Plaza Pública*, September 1, 2018. <https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/morales-cierra-la-puerta-la-cicig-y-amaga-con-autogolpe-de-estado-con-musica-de-mariachis-de/>

¹⁶ Similar associations of the purity and stasis of the heteronormative white Christian home are also bound up in the xenophobic nationalism that informs debates about migration and bodily autonomy in the United States, too. It is worth noting that President Morales was a staunch ally of U.S. President Donald Trump; in turn, Trump supported and assisted in Morales’s removal of Cicig from Guatemala.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text* 31/32: “Third World and Post-Colonial Issues” (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992): 141-153.

confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other...¹⁸

In 2018, we install *Dulce hogar* on the grounds of Convent Concepción 41, on the outskirts of Antigua. Within hours of its completion, it attracts swarms of bees, who begin picking away at the surfaces of its bricks. The structure is big enough for a single person to enter, its frame tight around their body. The visitor is immediately surrounded by the thrumming work of the insects, which makes entry feel terrifyingly unsafe: the house is unhomed. "To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home," Ahmed writes.¹⁹ Not simply the subject, content, or objects contained within it, nor only a metaphor in the national or personal imaginary, the home is felt on the body, just as acts of remembering past homes and constituting new ones are intimately physical actions, eternally in the process of becoming and unbecoming.

In 2018, Verdugo's solo exhibition *Bajo sospecho*, shown at Galería Trama, charts the experience of a woman attacked and robbed in her own home. After surviving the attack, the woman begins to collect the license plate numbers of cars similar to the one her assailants drove: she follows them across the city, searching for her attackers. In the story Verdugo tells, the woman sews her skirts closed, a gesture of self-protection. In the exhibition, Verdugo stands near a skirt hanging in the middle of the room. She wears a matching piece of clothing as she narrates the tale. Impressions of automobile plates fill the room.

Ahmed describes leaving home—and the associated loss of memories and experiences there—as not uniquely a migrant ontology, but rather, a common pattern within the experience of estrangement. "It is through the very loss of a past (the sharing of the loss, rather than the past as sharing) that the 'we' comes to be written as Home," she writes. "It is hence the act of forgetting that allows the subject to identify with a history, to find out, to discover, what one has already lost: here, what is already lost is the phantastic 'we' of a nation, city and house."²⁰

Shortly after *Bajo sospecho*, Verdugo moved to Montevideo. There, boats and nautical mythologies begin to seep into her work, displacing the home structure.

¹⁸ Bhabha, 141.

¹⁹ Ahmed, 341

²⁰ Ahmed, 330.

She installs a small boat in her 2021 exhibition *Bajamar*, then traces its form in pieces of cut leather (Fig. 7). Hooks, chains, and small weights form elegant compositions in this new, watery world. On a piece of blue fabric, she draws out the elements of a small vessel: an oar, the helm, a sail all appear in diagrammatic outlines (Fig. 8). The light, gauzy fabric hangs loosely from the wall, its undulating folds creating intricate shadows behind it. A series of notebooks accompanying the exhibition tell a nautical dream, which Verdugo illustrates in pencil. The floating movements of boats, their endless wandering, their susceptibility to weather and sinking, all form a striking contrast to the house metaphors of her earlier works. “The artist looks for a place to which she can be tied, takes apart the image of a boat, establishes ephemeral connections in an endlessly imprecise journey,” writes artist Lucía Pittaluga. “Inés Verdugo sets out a poetics in transit, a dreamlike landscape in constant deconstruction...”²¹

Which is, perhaps, a beautiful way to say: she’s gotten out of the house.

—Rincón, New Mexico, 2022

²¹ “La artista busca un lugar donde amarrarse, deconstruye la imagen de un barco, establece conexiones efímeras en un tránsito siempre impreciso... Inés Verdugo enuncia una poética en tránsito, un paisaje onírico en constante deconstrucción...” Lucía Pittaluga, *Bajamar* exhibition text taken from the website inesverdugo.com. Trans. by the author.

- p. 201, Fig. 1. Inés Verdugo, *Arraigo*, 2017.
Single-channel video (no audio), 3:10 min.
Image courtesy of the artist.
- p. 202, Fig. 2. Inés Verdugo, *Estar ahí*, 2017.
Six heliograph prints on cotton paper, dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of the artist.
- p. 203, Fig. 3. Inés Verdugo, *Desarraigo*, 2018
Resin, fiberglass, latex, wallpaper. 56 pieces, dimensions variable.
Image by Galería Sol del Río, provided courtesy of the artist.
- p. 204, Fig. 4. Inés Verdugo, *Asilo (untitled)*, 2016.
Sponge and objects, dimensions variable.
Photography by Andrés Vargas, provided courtesy of the artist.
- p. 205, Fig. 5. Inés Verdugo, *Asilo (Vahído)*, 2016.
Painted metal and filter, 98 x 35 x 33 cm.
Photography by Andrés Vargas, provided courtesy of the artist.
- p. 206, Fig. 6. Inés Verdugo, *Dulce hogar*, 2018.
Sugar, 1 x 1 x 1.5 m.
Photography by Byron Marmól for the Bienal de Arte Paiz,
provided courtesy of the artist.
- p. 207, Fig. 7. Inés Verdugo, *Variaciones de un barco*, 2020.
Leather, dimensions variable.
Fundación Kavlin, Punta del Este, Uruguay.
Photography by Ignacio Rodríguez Sraonian,
provided courtesy of the artist.
- p. 208, Fig. 8. Inés Verdugo, *Barcos desde mi Ventana*, 2020.
Fabric, 2 x 2 m.
Fundación Kavlin, Punta del Este, Uruguay.
Photography by Ignacio Rodríguez Sraonian,
provided courtesy of the artist.

