



KEKE VILABELDA: THROUGH THE EYES OF AN EAGLE

by Dr Peter Hill, writer, artist and curator

I am delighted to introduce you to the work of Keke Vilabelda. Keke is one of Spain's leading contemporary artists, with a growing international presence on three continents. Arriving in Melbourne a few weeks ago, Keke hit the ground running and has been working at fever-pitch in Grau Projekt's artist-in-residency space - the first international artist to do so. Months of preparations between Valencia, Mexico City, and Melbourne predated his arrival. So what kind of work does he make? It would be incorrect to simply describe him as an Installation artist, because the individual fragments of his production are as stand-alone important as the overall concept. He is a painter. He uses video and drones. He has covered Grau Projekt, one of the largest contemporary art spaces in Australia, in ten tons of salt.

When I first meet Keke, he is working across three very large canvases taped to the studio floor. His energy is as palpable as his smile is winning. We both find we have in common a love of the Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies, and swap stories about the different videos and YouTube clips we have seen of him sweeping tar, paint, and sand across the surface of vast, flat canvases. We speak about Keke's different working methods: collage, frottage, pouring, scraping, using brushes of all kinds from brooms to squirrel-hair, but finding alternatives to brushes such as windscreen-wiper blades taken from abandoned utes. Like all great artists, he has invented his own visual language and is forever honing and expanding its syntax.

But Keke has soared - sometimes up through the eyes of a drone, or an eagle hunting its prey; sometimes down to the freeways through the lens of a surveillance camera, - beyond the closed language of painting and drawing and into the 'open' field of relational systems. Sometimes he is a psychogeographer, exploring the streets of whichever city he is based in. Sometimes he is an adventurer, forsaking the studio for the dried-up salt beds of distant Victorian lakes, or the floating orchards of Mexico City.

And just as he does not confine himself to one sense - the visual - so he introduces sound to his investigations; the sound of the tools and of the running water recorded while he was constructing his paintings - self-referential, but with a beautiful circularity to the conceit; or the sound, barely perceptible at first, of our feet walking across his desert of salt, crossing the gallery floor like a tide.

Movement and space must also involve the relativity of time, and in the intelligent edits of Keke's video diptychs there is a built-in 30-second delay so that no two pairings are ever identical; endless change with endless commonalities of form, colour, and line.

All of these skills that take us into and beyond the expanded field of painting are lessons Keke has learned through his own travels in time and space, from his year learning English in Glasgow (while also recording its motorway system), to his fruitful years as a student at Central Saint Martins in London, working alongside a vibrant international cohort of contemporaries.

At the time of writing this I have almost, but not yet completely, experienced the whole exhibition. I don't yet know, for example, how this latter-day psychogeographer is going to translate his upcoming visit to the pink salt lakes onto his canvases. I have seen the underpainting that he has made in preparation for this (as exquisite in their fragile beauty as an Agnes Martin canvas or a Joseph Beuys line drawing), and I know he wants the crystalline forms of the arid zone landscape to rhyme with the pixels that define the big-city traffic cameras in Glasgow, Melbourne, and Mexico City. But they must also succeed in their own right, formally, without reference to anything other than themselves. So I am excited about returning to Grau Projekt to find out, and I hope you are too.

Keke Vilabelda's first Australian exhibition Common Ground is on view from 14 Nov 2019 at Grau Projekt.