



NICHOLAS ARROYAVE-PORTELA: TODO SOBRE MI PADRE

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Todo Sobre Mi Padre ('everything to do with my father') is a deeply charged exhibition. For all of the portentous aspirations of the theme, the show eruditely bypasses bombast or any sense of the forbidding. A good deal of this is to do with the notable skill applied to the construction and order of the work. The rippled, thrown, torn, fragmented, assembled clay components of these eleven wall pieces offer complex and rhythmic surfaces. There is more than enough subtlety and poise here for the exhibition to carry its symbolic weight with an elegiac grace. The precision of the clay pieces, the care taken over their surface painting in coloured slips, and the density of internal shadowing draws in the gaze to each individual work, and the relative sparseness of the hang also enables the whole sequence of wall pieces to be read in one long glance.

Arroyave-Portela's father Fernando (whose own father was Colombian) had been an eminent Oxford-based psychiatrist. He met his son for the first time at the age of seven. The account of travel, peripatetic wandering of necessity, the ground travelled, the weather experienced, and a man's place in the world are all gestures and ideas implicit in the torn, eroded, and trampled surfaces of the clay works. A map of South America makes a repeated appearance, an icon of geography, sometimes half-hidden and in one piece on a raised 'tectonic plate' of its own, conjoined with Africa. Forces of fractured geological movement, of time and erosion are all implicit in the wide and searching scope of the exhibition. Above all, this is a major sequence of work imbued with sense of place, memory, and love.

Its intensity derives from its confessional nature, but also takes account of the artist's personal wrestling with identity, as well as the record of his father's life, travels, and character. These issues are faced in a work such as *Who am I? Flags, Territories and Frontiers*. This piece does not solve the question, but it does propose that the world itself has changed with the immensity of geological time as much as the interventions and orderings, the mapping and flag-laying of humans. Professor Fraser argues that the work can also be read both as a world map of sorts and more mundanely 'as a patch of drying mud... or a close-up of a London plane tree, or a reptile sloughing its skin: in each case there is new life under the surface'. The sedimentary layers of these pieces are as important as the drama and wrested complexity of their surfaces and compositions.

This fine, introspective, deeply personal exhibition reflects well on the artist and on Contemporary Applied Arts. The move that Nicholas Arroyave-Portela has made from vessels to wall pieces has been a demonstrable success: neither indulgent nor hagiographic. This exhibition is local and global; personal and objective. And the quiet serious account of these few works provides additional evidence that CAA is on good form as the key specialist public-focused venue for the crafts in London. The modest exhibition room has a lot of serious weight on its shoulders. One visitor to the exhibition wrote in the comments book that the show presented 'beautiful, poignant work'. It would be difficult to disagree. Exhibitions of this stature add to the argument that Contemporary Applied Arts should retain the support and investment of public funders in the challenging years to come.

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