

## Sam Laughlin, *A Certain Movement*

To look at the photography of Sam Laughlin is to be reintroduced to nature. His black and white images of natural systems converse in a singular visual language. They seek out patterns and correlations, yet never let us forget that the simple, but profound pleasures depicted can easily be taken for granted or overlooked. With a reputation for his passionate documentation of forms and practices, both natural and man-made, the photographer has now produced a body of work about animal behaviour as a significant factor in shaping our environment.

*A Certain Movement* engages Laughlin's interests in the idea of an "ecological niche". It focuses on the role or position a species has within its habitat, as well as its accompanying behavioural adaptations; how it meets the need for sustenance and shelter, how it survives, how it reproduces and so on. After all, it makes perfect sense for a species to occupy a unique niche in an ecosystem in order to minimise competition for resources within certain geographic and biotic contexts. Working within these parameters, Laughlin is intrigued by the manner in which a species may not only grow in and respond to its environment, but may also, during this very process, modify it.

Setting out on walks across different parts of the UK, spanning Cambridge to the Orkney Islands, Laughlin observes nature's intricacies at a macro level, inevitably homing in on modest rather than spectacular landscapes. While he possesses all the customary unremitting attention and patience, Laughlin is no traditional "wildlife photographer". Instead he opts for a more conceptual approach, the techniques and guiding principles of which aim to grasp the complexities of slow time and interaction, rather than the sensational drama of any photographic "instant". Consider Laughlin's triptych of abandoned nests, which depicts the constructions of Reed Warblers (*Acrocephalus Scirpaceus*) that migrate to Europe from Africa each year to rear their young. Built within reed beds, they are precariously perched on multiple stems above water. 'The construction method is based on a genetically coded set of behaviours,' Laughlin has explained. 'Each nest, built by an individual bird, is a unique iteration of an instinctual process so precariously perched in the thicket.' Full of stillness and silence, Laughlin's view of this concentrated mass of carefully-woven twigs is both dizzying and visually arresting in effect.

Laughlin largely presents his images in an understated way, much like the landscapes themselves, to fully convey a calm, meditative, intellectual and aesthetic excursion through the world with photography. This tendency is often referred to as the "quiet" photograph, the characteristics of which pre-eminent German curator Thomas Weski acutely observed in his essay 'Expeditions to Explored Areas' from *Stephen Shore: Photographs 1973-1993* (1994): 'Photographers shape [their pictures] subtractively and use photographic methods to select, on the basis of their own themes, only a part, a detail from what is present – from the world...'

In *A Certain Movement*, the quiet photographic view of a natural world marginalised by human activities is the result of great observational skill and fastidiousness, where perception and knowledge of certain phenomena – snakes mating, dragonflies laying eggs on plants in water, or the traces of beavers that have destroyed trees in order to build dams

– rewards the curious and those willing to get closer: those who are prepared to see beyond what they think they see.

### **Alejandra Carles-Tolra, *Where We Belong***

A group of Jane Austen devotees serves as the starting point for [\*Where We Belong\*](#) by Alejandra Carles-Tolra, [who for](#) the past two years, has been following a global community who share a deep passion for the famed 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist.

The “Jane Austen Pineapple Appreciation Society”, as it is called, may sound like just another gallery of wonderful English eccentrics: a subject ripe for investigation through the camera lens. However, it offers the perfect pretext for Carles-Tolra to explore themes of belonging, femininity and escapism in line with the interests that continue to drive and shape her practice as a photographer. During her career to date, Carles-Tolra has made work looking at individuals that are part of a group with a strong, collective identity, which they have joined either through choice or consequence. She is motivated by questions about their defining characteristics, the role our surroundings play and the thresholds between the two, as well as the degree to which our understanding of these individuals is influenced by preconceived notions associated with shared solidarities.

This foray into “Janeites”, as they are referred to, sees Carles-Tolra offer up an admirable study of its members coming together to celebrate their love of Austen’s literary wit and wisdom in full Regency costume – attending balls, listening to readings, enjoying picnics, site visits and so on. Visiting many of their functions, the photographer closely observes moments of intimacy, and goes beyond merely commenting on the practice of appropriating dress and custom, prompting a deeper understanding of connection and belonging.

The characters she pictures often exhibit expressions of support, comfort or unity, since they physically interact while posing together for their portrait, ushering in a strange affection and atmosphere of camaraderie. Of course, there is also a consoling fantasy for many of those taking part in such pursuits (stories of emotional and personal journeys are not unusual to hear), as they seek solace in the immersion afforded by Austen’s powerful words and worlds: a presence vividly conjured up, if only for a few hours. This is particularly evidenced in some shots where the spectacle subsides, and aficionados are seen strolling through typical, British suburban streets at night, as if returning to their routine lives. The clash of banal signifiers – contemporary road markings and immaculately pruned hedges – offset against iconic 17<sup>th</sup> century dress, underscores the sense of distraction and relief, peeling back layers of the Janeites’ construction in the process.

With respect, and without judgement, Carles-Tolra celebrates her subjects, creating an unlikely blend of intimacy and artifice. An eagerness to be photographed further heightens the quality of performance and asserts their individuality, emerging from the wellspring between nostalgia for a bygone era and desire to assume a new identity: at least for a moment. Ultimately Carles-Tolra is interested in ‘inviting the viewer to question where the performance starts and ends, and to challenge where the limits between reality and imagination lie.’

## Lua Ribeira, *Subido al Cielo* (Heavenly Ascent)

'It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way, from tragedy to comedy. Hence, the incidents are fantastic and "unreal": they represent psychological, not physical triumphs.' So wrote Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell's book is a seminal examination of the human condition in relation to our perennial struggle for identity, as seen through the journey of the archetypal hero found in countless world mythologies, regardless of their origin or time of creation, from the likes of Osiris and Prometheus to Buddha, Moses, Muhammad and Jesus.

The emphasis placed upon psychic transformation, concepts of 'monomyth' and the possibility of regeneration [is](#) shared [in the](#) underlying themes [explored](#) in [Subido al Cielo \(Heavenly Ascent\)](#) by artist Lua Ribeira. [The series](#) is, as she describes it, [is](#) built on a fear of dying: an allegorical attempt to explore the inevitable decay of the human body in tandem with the mythologies created around the phenomena of death. Indeed, Ribeira has cited Campbell's text as a source of inspiration and influence on her thinking when developing this constructed series. The translation of these concepts into photographic imagery, however, is very much her own.

Through a distinctly personal visualisation, Ribeira pulls together different strands of imagery as part of a desire to escape from factual reality and longing to seek out mythological significance in contemporary life – a practice long lost to rationalism – through her focus on primordial vitality. It is, to channel her inner Nietzsche, whose *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) emphasised that the elements of Dionysus and Apollo were inextricably entwined in real tragic art.

The result of a collaboration with a diverse group of people, *Subido al Cielo* sees Ribeira cast actors for roles within a larger, operatic narrative allowing her to at once conceptualise and perform notions of struggle, pain, fear or desperation. Through a myriad of gestures, postures and expressions inherited from Greek Tragedy, a sense of drama and theatre is created, while also alluding to the depiction of certain emotions in Western religious art. Ribeira grew up against a backdrop of Catholic culture and thus, the belief that it is preferable for the body to suffer torment in its time on earth in order to spend eternity in heaven, pervaded her upbringing. It is the relationship of this ongoing physical struggle versus its ambience at the point of death that piques her curiosity.

Individual works move through a range of different depictions, such as portraits incorporating the use of masks, to individuals journeying into the afterlife, or reappearing as apparitions and phantasmagoria. In her brand of staged documentary, Ribeira employs the photographic image to create intimate narrative sequences of a mythological nature, in which meaning is derived from visual symbols and where performance underlines their artifice. These are complemented by Eden-esque landscapes evoking archetypal visions of paradise or [a](#) past utopia, where all is [in](#) harmony [with a belief that this once existed](#) and that [it](#) will exist again.