



## STORIES OF TERRA

By Filipa Ramos

In Portugal, where I come from and where Gabriel Chaile lives, there is just one word for the Earth, the land, the soil and the ground: *Terra*. Planet is *terra*. Homeland is *terra*. Compost is *terra*. Dry land, as distinct from sea or air, is *terra*. To belong to the planet is to be *terrestre*. To land is to *aterrar* and to bury *enterrar*. An *aterro* is a landfill, the negation, a-, of *terra*, the land destroyed. *Terracota* is baked earth. *Terra* is both place, space and matter. It is the substance and concept that makes coming together possible: the becoming of beings, the shaping of things, the emergence of places and experiences. *Terra* is the primordial substance out of which we come and to which we will eventually return.

There is an interesting confluence between the multiple meanings of *terra* and the ways in which Gabriel Chaile expresses his belonging to a land that is his, a planetary *terra* that is ours, and the muddy, earthly, telluric substance with which he materialises much of his work. Through his hands, *terra* assumes one and many shapes, all distinct, all entangled. This relationship between Chaile's plastic engagement with ancestral figurations associated to his homeland in Northern Argentina, the capture of syncretic traces of indigenous identity from various civilizations and the use of adobe as a basic element that structures and shapes his creations is what makes his practice so relevant and unique. The faces of his characters, their elongated eyes, mysterious expressions and delicate hands hugging stylised bodies bear striking affinities with Minoan, indigenous American and Polynesian figurations. The fact that they all emerge out of such bare substances as mud, water and straw only enhances a syncretic approach that connects the soil, the world and the Earth.

In a moment such as ours, in which there seems to be a growing gap between the technologic and the human, the self and the genuine, the personal and the universal, Chaile's capacity to bring together ancient and contemporary technologies of representation and to remain faithful to his own roots while speaking a language that the world understands is almost magical.

Within such a framework of accelerated production and global circulation of one's image and art, it is particularly hard to be able to balance

value, solidity and transformation. Which is why such a mutation of vocabulary and theme as the one attested in this exhibition is so touching and meaningful. It attests to the artist's own desire to go beyond a zone of comfort and a known methodology and to experiment with new forms and languages. What is at stake here is an important translation of volumes and forms into flat surfaces and the interplay of the traditions of sculpture and drawing, which are blended into one another. But furthermore, we assist to an important event that is less formal and more discursive. It concerns the displacement of the ways in which narrative and story-telling have acted upon Chaile's work as processes of memory and affect transmission from the personal and familial to a universal realm. Previous sculptures often honoured friends and family members: people with whom Chaile had shared a whole life or a specific moment in time. Diego, Brenda and others were turned into icons of both themselves and humanity as a whole, as the basic traits of their character stood out across the personal and the universal. Here, in these mural works, his interest focuses on art's relationship to representation and story-telling: on how art was born out of a desire to tell stories and how narrative was made possible by art. For this to happen, the humans of his figures had to step to the background to allow their own history, and the history of art, to be told. This means that there is also a leap in time, onto an epoch in which all things were beginning.

As this mural tells us, art begun with animals, with the desire to capture and immortalise those creatures that early humans had observed and desired, traced and followed, and then hunted and killed. Afterwards, these animals started haunting those who got them. They appeared in their dreams, the shapes of their bodies, the warmth of their fur, their breathing and munching sounds echoing in their minds. These visions became traces: the figures of the first animals humans ever made. Ghosts engraved on rock, for as long as a forever lasts. Charcoal and iron minerals were the most common materials used to draw on cave walls. Black became the matter of the animals' new bodies, supporting this exercise of transposition of flesh to image, prairie to rock, life to death. Oxen, bisons and horses that have been inscribed onto stone for more than 17,000 years. They were drawn in the dark, a darkness so dark that even the brightness of a torch



could only partially lid, illuminating fragments of wall here and there, a bit at a time. Yet, when the light would shine upon these figures, made from burnt branches and iron particles, they were brought back to life. The flickering flames accentuated the volume and texture of the stone upon which the animals were drawn. Dancing flames that animated horses and buffalos. Fire—the same fire that still burns inside Chaile’s ovens—made these animals run wild again and fire placed the desire for cinema inside the human mind, a desire that continues to be actualised today.

Here, Chaile emerges as a descendant of these ancestral transpositions of life into image in motion. His drawings on adobe recall these early gestures of figuration that mixed the human and the animal in their strangeness and difference. These drawings also tell a history of metamorphosis and transformation: how the human emerged from the animal by becoming that who controlled fire and *terraformed*. This *terra* from where we—we humans, animals, things of this world—come from becomes, once more, and who knows forever, the medium through which our story is told.

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GABRIEL CHAILE  
*Los jóvenes olvidaron sus canciones  
o Tierra de Fuego (Partell)*  
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