

Claudia Bitran's *Titanic* is a work about another work. A feature-length film about another feature-length film. But it is also a meditation on bodies. You could try analyzing it by assigning it some recognizable category, but in this piece, formal edges have been deliberately erased or reassigned.

That is, the film begins, develops, and ends. But the intersections it builds within it manage to defer the desire to categorize: what is it and why was it made?

First, the film is a pretext generated by impulses and intensities, which soon morphs into a complex instrument of reflection. Like the polished surface of a mirror, where your surroundings momentarily reside, another reality exists in this work and it disappears in the blink of an eye.

And as a whole, the sum of these reflections imposes a delay.

It delays access to the original. Or we never access it directly. We always see James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) through Bitran.

We are witnessing a realignment, a transformation. Bitran takes on the monumental through the miniature and considers information loss as a creative opportunity. The artist becomes a centrifugal force. She absorbs several facets of the cinematographic profession into one: she assumes the role of director, producer, coordinator, editor, actress, makeup artist, costume designer, lighting, props, camerawoman, and art director.

By moving scenes that occur on the ocean to the cities in which dwells, Bitran contrasts the virtual with the real. She collages, mixes, subverts. She recreates the interiors of the boat in public spaces. She kills continuity. She makes the logic of reflection uncomfortable. This modification of a mega-production into its own kind of everyday entertains and dazzles, but also moves.

We see Bitran drag a two-meter replica of the Titanic (which she built by hand and lit from the inside so that each cabin window appears illuminated) slowly and silently across the floor of her studio to the other end of the room where Styrofoam cubes represent the iceberg against which the ship crashes.

Explosive moments like these make explicit the desire to build and then destroy (one of the engines that drives this work). And Bitran chooses – in order to deconstruct – the history of what once was the most luxurious ship in the world, but is now reduced to a heap of ruins caked in underwater mud.<sup>1</sup> She remakes a movie that cost \$200 million to make for a minimal cost.

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<sup>1</sup> The Wikipedia entry describes the wreck of the Titanic as a "vast field of rubble." It states that the mahogany-paneled salons, the imperial hand carved staircase, the huge glass dome and first-class compartments – with their private fireplaces – are being consumed by bacteria and microorganisms at the bottom of the Atlantic.

And she succeeds in maintaining the aura of a manufactured object. In each of the scenes, one can observe the manual nature or craft that impresses either for its thoroughness or by the creative leap it proposes.

It happens that, as in a game of mirrors, every visual element within this work is a reflection of another. In them, one can perceive the fear of the monstrous, the dread of the distance from the original. And a series of distorted images also arises: amplified, reduced, or altered versions of the symbols that construct its plot.

These constructions are metaphors.

The figure of the artist is filtering always the anguish of not knowing from where the reflections one sees emerge. And it is perhaps the only figure that is capable of containing and supporting this work about a body (let's say, hers) that exposes the distance between it and others.

In the opening sequence of the 1997 film, we watch as a robot tries to break through the cavernous interior of the ship, which sank more than 4,000 meters deep, with a surprising delicacy to the mechanical arm it uses to manipulate the Titanic's remains. We know a human body is monitoring the instrument remotely.

The same thing happens in this work. We know that Bitran is behind all of the deployed techniques that, when assembled, make up the work's narrative flow: in the scale reproductions, in the layouts, in the frame-by-frame animations. All of them find a resonance in the figure of the artist and her body.

Consider that the original *Titanic* was also, as an historical representation, a metaphor for the disposal of bodies: a scale model of the capitalist system ascending rapidly at that time. And more than a century after its sinking, Bitran takes it on to inhabit another body, a fictional character's body. Although she plays the role of Rose (she dyes her hair red and dresses, moves, and speaks like the character), her appropriation goes beyond the exclusively superficial or cosmetic level. Bitran commits her identity to this personification because her body is both the instrument and the message.

In her career, the artist has a precedent that today could be seen as a rehearsal for this exercise: in 2010, she performed as Britney Spears in *My Name Is*, a Chilean reality show about celebrity impersonators. The academic and performing artist Horacio Perez, who observed Bitran's participation in this show notes: "A double is an equal, identical, which places the act of imitation in the sphere of production and reproduction. By imitating a famous artist, not only is the double 'copying,' but she is playing at a number of actions, gestures, and physical characteristics of the real person, promoting a 'commodification' of a singular body. Imitation

(which in English is ‘to impersonate,’ i.e. incarnate) implies reproduction, transforming every aspect of an individual’s uniqueness into a product that can also be reproduced.”<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, Bitran’s version takes on the precarious as a positive value; the artist manipulates and reassigns the resources of reproduction. It opens up a way for the work to move so that it can capsize the massive into the personal. She uses her body as a palimpsest of representations, in which hers is superimposed always on the preceding construction of Rose: she replicates and destroys it. In this distancing exercise, Bitran personifies, disguises, and resembles another, which in its reflective capacity gives back an altered image of her self.

The bodies in the interior of the Titanic comprise a greater body. And under that light, Bitran is the eye. The mechanical arm. The underwater camera. The observed object. The operator behind the mechanical arm. The spectator and the director.

Her obsessions are what find meaning in the act of reproduction.  
Her versions of the characters are what reformulate the scenes.

Although this is a monumental and collaborative project, the result is extremely intimate and personal.

In order to build the illusion of a community, she uses reflection. For example, it happens that when bodies are dominated by desire, they tend to multiply. In the kissing scene on the bow, Bitran assigns the character of Jack to a dozen collaborators and is kissed by co-stars of different ages, genders, and ethnicities. The same happens in the nude scene, when she is painted by a variety of hands (and styles). Also in the sex scene, Jack is simultaneously played by a man and by a woman.

They are mirrors.

Skin is just a first layer of the bodies that Bitran uses, but the intention of going into their subcutaneous tissues, nerves, ligaments, follicles, and glands prevails. She wants to reach the guts. Overcome the surface. Move, remove.

So, with that distance, it is possible to understand her collaborators as docile bodies.<sup>3</sup> All are subject to the project or the artist’s will, who is, in this case, also the agent of power that intervenes them.

The function of these bodies? To reflect.  
But to reflect what?

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<sup>2</sup> Horacio Pérez, personal correspondence, July 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault coins this term in “Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison,” who suggests, “A body is docile that can be subjected, used, transferred and improved.”

Bitran recreates the scene of the transatlantic clash with the iceberg and therein lies a key: bursts of fleeting and blurry shots of Manhattan. This montage reminds us, in lightning speed, of the September morning when New York was represented – and reproduced ad nauseam – as a metaphor of vulnerability.

Symbolically, Bitran's work is shaped by two historic events where bodies were expelled *en masse* from their containers: the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001.

The transition from bodies to cadavers is a jump that ends with a momentary light that shines and shudders:

Fifteen hundred bodies floating in the North Atlantic.

Two thousand six hundred bodies exploding in New York.

Plus other bodies that aren't there.

Lightning is the light that branches down from the clouds without ever reaching the earth.

Frozen or sunken, bodies burned or thrown into the void. Docile bodies are molded, manipulated, moved, transformed. Altered. Represented. Replicated. Vulnerable bodies embodied by the artist. Bodies multiplied into masses.

A field of action that is also a field of meaning.

In the intervals between these bursts, the tragic condition of the twentieth century looms: a vast field of rubble. And so we look at it from afar. Knowing that the lightning that illuminates it never touches the earth.