

## **Dots and Dashes, Crumbs and Ashes: Traces of Trauma's Abstractions**

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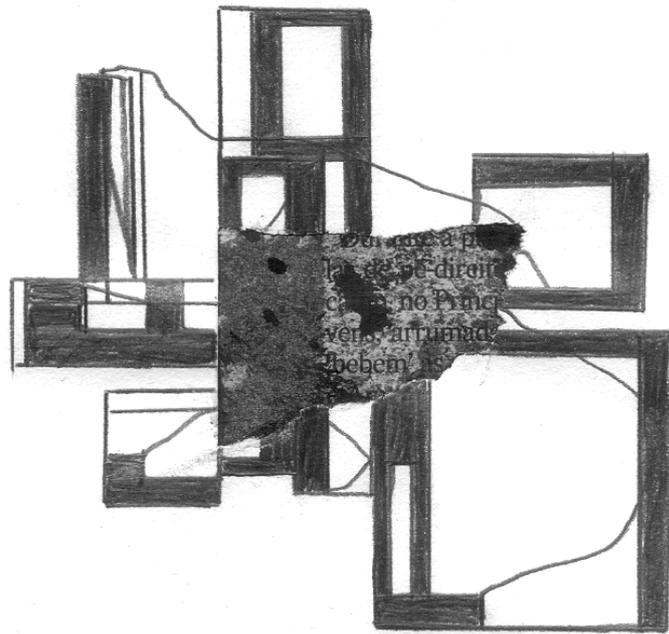
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## INTRODUCTION

After a catastrophe, our surroundings become *unheimlich* and unnavigable. They are no longer ours and yet often we remain there among the ruins in search of a connection. Shadowy images of the past play out their parts in familiar spaces made strange in the works of two artists who are the focus of this text. In her paintings, Gwenessa Lam (b. 1978, Vancouver) references the real, affixing shadows as the remaining afterimage of lives – and also of heritage – lost in transit. Her sight is focused, from a distance, on natural disasters and communal trauma that may have very personal consequences. For María Elena Álvarez (b. 1964, Caracas), however, it is the inverse: her experience is private, triggered by immediate socio-political unrest. She begins, not with memory evoking loss, but instead within the void itself, inhabiting its emptiness. Slowly she draws into it – “deposits” as she says – unrecognizable elements, organizing space in layers. Álvarez creates a refuge within canvas and dry point plates while Lam fills her paintings with ghostly remnants in a state of restless haunting. Co-authored by Kathleen MacQueen and Liz Park in a process of exchange with the artists, this paper offers insight into the distinct ways by which the artists deploy abstraction as a silent resistance to the inscrutable nature of trauma. First as an exploratory unfolding of the messages coded into Álvarez’s work as narrated by MacQueen, then second as a visual analysis and a journey through Lam’s paintings by Park, the text will arrive at a point where the two artists’ works intersect in a meditation of physical and metaphysical space.

## PART I. THE CONSEQUENCE OF WORDS: MARÍA ELENA ÁLVAREZ’S HIDDEN POCKETS OF UNDERSTANDING

In the subdued light of a late afternoon in November, I study a small drawing of about three inches square on a sheet of paper of approximately  $7\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$  inches (15 x 19 cm).<sup>1</sup> Drawn with pencil, some of the lines make use of a straight edge, while others are free form. The drawing abounds in right angles. Lines are doubled and filled in with strokes of graphite, thickening their form, laying emphasis first here, then there. Overall, one senses reflections in a prism; frames split, then merge in an overlapping spatial array of foreground, mid-ground, and background. Loosely drawn connectors highlight this fractured placement, appearing alternately as circuits or cracks. Overlaying the center and seemingly transparent is a torn shred of newspaper (a rare introduction of an element from the material world) – one edge cut clean to line up with a tall vertical frame, the other two edges roughly torn – cutting across and masking the center of the drawing. With dots to the left and letters forming lines to the right, it has the appearance of a flag flapping in the wind. Text is visible only as letters, words themselves illegible aside from the fragment: “no Prin.” In the cold glow of on-coming winter, I read it as “no Prince.”



**Figure 1**  
María Elena Álvarez, *Untitled*, 2014, mixed media on paper, 15x19cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

No hero, no authority, no savior. Only a suggestion of space. Perhaps the cracks of ruins. While Gwenessa Lam's work travels from the factual to the void, María Elena Álvarez's begins there, depositing elements into it as lines and layouts, and organizing space into "multi-layered camps of emptiness."<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson might have asked: What kind of image is capable of "serving as a conductor of psychic energy"?<sup>3</sup> The scrap of newspaper is merely detritus of a transitory relevance, both the technology and content quickly obsolete. For Álvarez, it is not so much the subject or the surface of an image that holds traumatic content, but its construction, which resonates from its effect. She speaks of her work as avoiding visual references – though it is difficult to describe art without falling back onto the kind of imagery a reader might grasp in recognition. Giving us hints as a guide not to look "at" an object but to look "through" space across thresholds and into passageways, Álvarez begins with the invisible: "silence, music, [...] the consequence of words and phrases I hear."

Rather than depart from visual references, her work begins – much like resuming a relationship – with "a question, a no/sound time."<sup>4</sup> For Edmond Jabès, the question is the place to pick up again, philosophy's return to the beginning:

Then, the question.

The question means that, for the time of its formulation, we do not belong. We do not belong with belonging; we are unbound within bonds. Detached, in order to become more fully attached and then again detached. It means we forever turn the *inside out*, set it free, revel in its freedom, and die of it.

Cruel calling and recalling into question. Double responsibility.

I am. I become. I write. I write only in order to become. I am only the man [woman?] I become who, in turn, stops being to become the other [s]he has potentially always been. I am all the others I will be. I will not be. They will be me who cannot be.

The question leaves a blank: the page.<sup>5</sup>

This small drawing, *Untitled* (2014), has been sitting on my desk since April when I exchanged a packet of art materials for a packet of prints and drawings through a friend of the artist who was traveling on business. The art was a far greater gift than the supplies I sent to an artist stifled by restrictions in an economically and politically unstable Venezuela. It would serve in lieu of an international exhibition for providing an experience of her work. But various factors inhibited my research and it was only now in November that I unpacked once again the other prints only to discover an additional packet of writing hidden in what I had assumed was the protective padding of the wrapper. Written in graphite, 41 small sheets of paper were taped together into a hidden pocket of understanding that I now unfolded slowly in order to listen to her tale, for I almost *heard* her voice reaching out to assuage a separation of time, place, and experience.

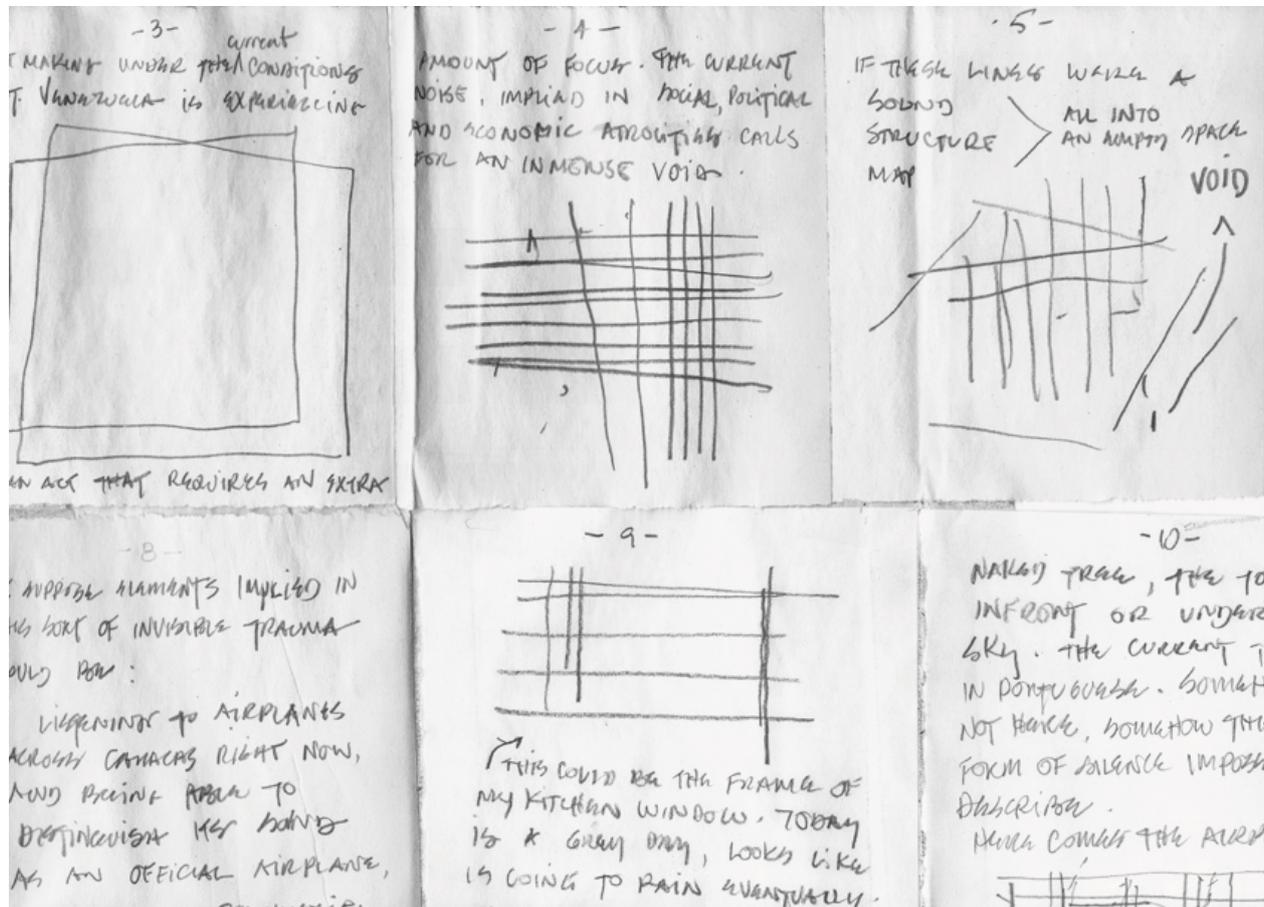
If these lines were a sound / structure / map > all into an empty space *\_VOID\_* what would be the resurging trauma of living in a country divided in 2, 3, 4 layers of minds convinced of 4 different realities—what would be the trauma of being and trying to open [oneself] to listening to 2 or 3 arguments of each part?

I suppose elements implied in this sort of invisible trauma could be: listening to airplanes across Caracas right now, and being able to distinguish 147 Boeing [jet] as an official airplane and not a commercial small plane.<sup>6</sup>

A few months earlier, we resumed a conversation interrupted by the course of events, both political and personal, for more than a decade; when the Skype image appeared on my screen, I told María Elena that the view out her window resembled the structure of her recent paintings.<sup>7</sup> Later, she wrote next to a small drawing on the pages she sent to me:

This could be the frame of my kitchen window. Today is a grey day, looks like [it's] going to rain eventually. I am listening to the soundtrack of Wim Wender's *Pina*. I see through the window a naked tree, the top of it in

front or under a white sky. The current track is in Portuguese. Somehow I'm not here, somehow this is a form of silence impossible to describe.  
Here comes the airplane again.



**Figure 2**

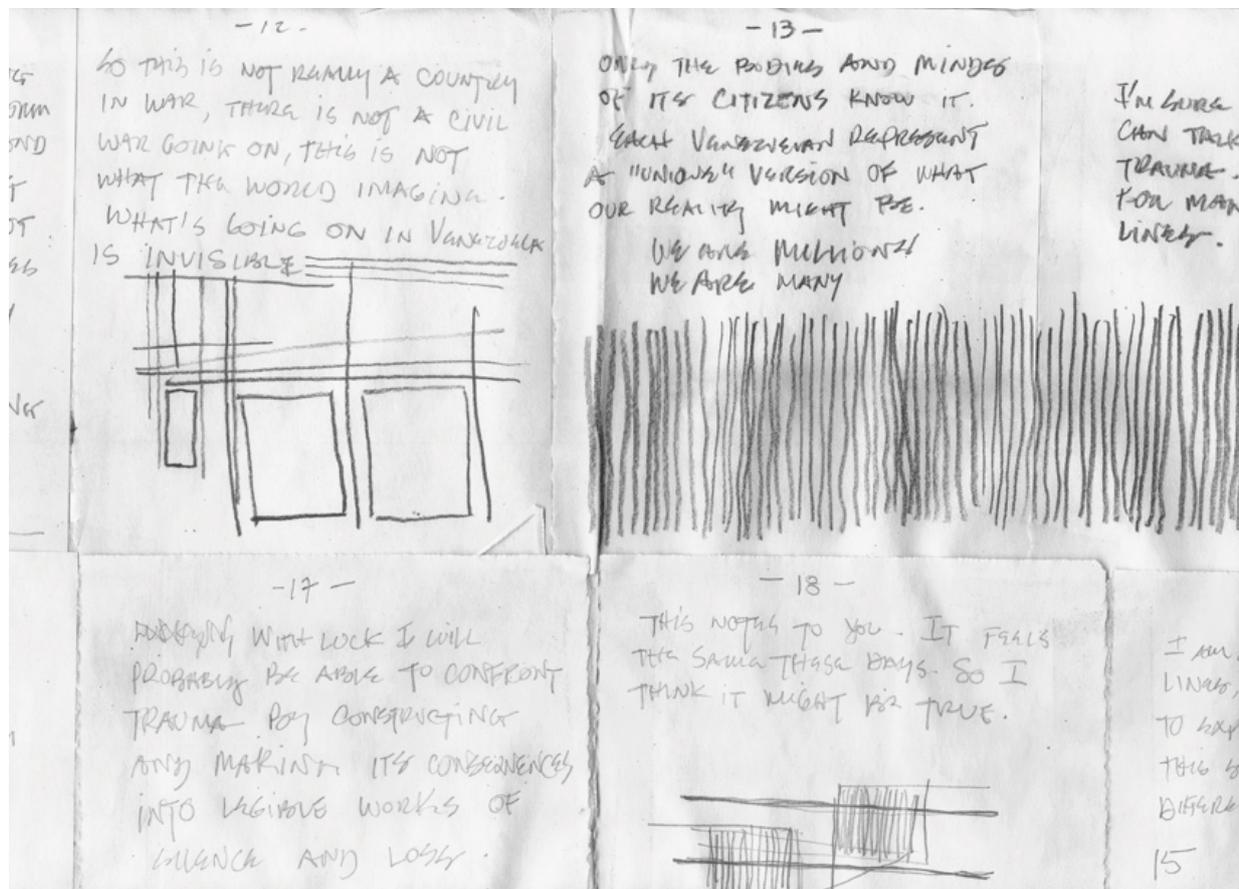
Maria Elena Álvarez, pages from correspondence with the author, Kathleen MacQueen, April 2014  
Image courtesy of the artist and the author.

She reveals an experience of drift – slipping in and out of awareness of her environment – movement to an imaginative space empty of the touchstones of perception: sight, sound, touch, or taste. Moments lost, then reconnected through attention to detail. Each set of text lines is accompanied by drawn lines revealing the manner by which she uses line as a stabilizing structure to translate to paper her determined obstinacy in the face of instability. Here she has drawn many vertical lines across several sheets.

Each Venezuelan represents a “unique” version of what our reality might be. We are millions. We are many. I’m sure plenty of them can talk about their trauma. I’m waiting for many lines, more lines. As the lines come, I guess by the end of all this situation / invisible / ungraspable I’m going to have a whole body of work [...] that is coming out of silence and emptiness.

Lines then, for Álvarez, are the lowest common denominator; like writing, if left with nothing, there is *a blank, the page*. If silenced by fear and the threat of reprisal, she will build a language out of the most basic glyph that exists: the line. On the emptiness of a page – double for the body – the lines represent the losses entering the body, or, perhaps, not the losses themselves,

but the structure necessary to sustain them. It is interesting that losses enter rather than leave – absence as presence – inarticulate remnants within a body that bears (witness to) them.



**Figure 3**

Maria Elena Álvarez, pages from correspondence with the author, Kathleen MacQueen, April 2014  
Image courtesy of the artist and the author.

As a child, I collected things in my pinafore's pockets so that, before washing, my mother would carefully empty them of stones, sticks, miniature toys, and the remains of a dinner I did not like, or did not have the courage, to eat. I would save all this for later, secreted away, whether as treasures or shame I could not say. Repression is a secreting away for tomorrow the kinds of experiences one cannot speak or even comprehend when they first occur. Without language there is no understanding. Without narrative, can an experience or a human being claim to exist (the proverbial tree in the forest)? How many threats have silenced narratives that try so desperately to escape their confines? Whose circumstances deserve the community's or the world's attention? What warrants circumspection as trauma? What renders sufferers visible?

Trauma is usually considered physical or psychological damage caused by an event that overwhelms the individual or a collective set of people. Trauma can be personal or historical, singular or repetitive, physical or psychological or any complex combination of these various frames. According to Freud, psychological trauma can result from fear of or loss of the loved one, fear of or bodily harm, and fear of annihilation. Situational trauma is easily traced to specific historical events (plane crash, genocide, catastrophe) but childhood trauma remains elusive since evidence (of a wide range of potential abuses) is often belated in the form of neurotic symptoms. Significantly, trauma is

defined by failure: the failure to respond adequately to an unknown and unforeseen situation and its consequent long-lasting impact. As Jean Laplanche synthesized Freud's view: Trauma is "an event in the subject's life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization."<sup>8</sup> The psyche being, by definition, hidden from direct knowledge, but revealed indirectly through symptoms and fears, dreams and desires.

The unfolding of Álvarez's missive is an unfolding of experiences secreted away. Pages alternate between the density of writing and the opacity of erasure. Yet they also ask to be held up to the window so that they too can become a transparent passage to the world at large, both an entrance and exit, open for exchange.

This situation [in my country] represents a huge [dis]respect to any human soul. As I write this, I know there are out there many arms open, in claims, in prayers, in self-defense, ready to clap, ready to hug, ready to throw back a stone or a bomb. This is true, so is the small bird that just landed through the kitchen window and is eating a few crumbs of bread from the floor.

There's food for birds in my kitchen.

There's freedom in my kitchen.

The artist also sent a photograph of endless drawings of chairs, which she erased and painted over in acrylic. Before obscuring the image, however, she framed each with four quick lines, marking its centrality, holding together the picture that is not a picture. *This is not a chair. This is no longer a picture of a chair. This is an act of erasure. The seat is gone. Place has disappeared. There is no/place.* Ironically, the etymological root of the word *utopia* is "not" or "no" and "place" – a place that doesn't exist – a place of the imagination or of speculation. Its English homophone *eutopia* comes from the Greek roots for "good" and "place," giving rise to euphoric notions of ideal communities. Each is the opposite of the other; each complicates the desire for something good to come of nothing, forging potential even when hope is silent.

In writing that she is "waiting for many lines, more lines," the artist simultaneously expresses the fear of crisis spreading ever wider and deeper among Venezuelans, but also the furtive hope of collectively facing the circumstances that have precipitated such instability. Although Venezuela avoided the state terrorism and violence of the 1970s and 80s that infiltrated much of Central and South America, its dependency on a volatile oil economy has led to massive government corruption both before and subsequent to the leftist social movement of Hugo Chavez. Since Chavez's death in 2013, an economic collapse due to falling oil prices has triggered two years of public demonstrations over government corruption, criminal violence, inflation, and chronic shortages of basic food and household supplies. Though its middle class is hardly affluent (per capita GDP is 1/3 that of the US) and the nation is 95% literate, there is an enormous class division between the middle class and the working poor who make up more than 50% of the population, while the small percentage of wealthy elite back the opposition leaders. Still far from witnessing the same degree of mass violence as Mexico, Venezuela is thought to be one of the most violent countries in the world with a rate of one murder every 21 minutes.<sup>9</sup> This conflict, uncertainty, and fear are the context, though not the content, of Álvarez's work.



**Figure 4**  
Maria Elena Álvarez, *Chairs*  
(work in progress), 2014,  
mixed media on paper  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Instead of documentation, the artist devises an abstraction comprised of layered meanings that is inclusive of its own silent repression and expressive of a will to continue. On the one hand, without the referent it cannot *speak* in the literal sense of the term. On the other hand, as an action of vertical lines (the human axis) on a horizontal playing field (the earth's surface), these works represent a faith in human resolve and a reliance on the communicability of intimacy: *There's freedom in my kitchen*. A secular sacrality. The erased chair, however, from an art historical point of view, can

also be considered an ironic dismissal of Joseph Kosuth's circular system of signs, *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which equalizes the relation between the object, its representation, and its definition. Within the experience and the consequences of trauma, the signified (as meaning) is troubled territory and any reference to the signifier (as archetype) becomes suspect. The individual who suffers trauma often has difficulty distinguishing between very real fears of reprisal and paranoid interpretations of events and environment. While others often assume the sufferer portrays the pathological obsession of a diseased mind, the individual is likely exhibiting the acute anxiety that has become a tool of self-preservation.<sup>10</sup> There are few safety zones in the experience of trauma's repetitions.

Indeed, the complexity in working through trauma is its inherent feature of *latency* and displacement. As Cathy Caruth points out in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), an originary trauma "is not experienced as it occurs, [but] is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time."<sup>11</sup> The "evidence" of trauma is inadequately represented by the dislocated repetition of traumatic occurrences (external to the individual) or neurotic symptoms (internal to the individual) that never fully duplicate the trauma itself, thereby indefinitely postponing insight and resolution. Those who suffer often seek a utopian reconciliation within memory of a time when their life was once whole – an idealized centering – that cannot take place...that has *no/place*. If not a void, what they experience is often a fractured or fragmented condition that is perpetually undetermined and unsettling.

We cannot resolve what we cannot know and so it becomes necessary to make a claim for uncertainty. For Jabès, the unknowable is sacred:

Here is distress, the despair of love within love, infinite pain within pain, delirium blazing within delirium. Here is passivity rent in its deep sovereignty. Here, like a bottomless cliff, like the dark of all nights.

How far does our responsibility go? The void is forged by our hands.<sup>12</sup>

Individual responsibility is the task of a broader engagement; Jabès's faith is countered by Dominique La Capra's caution. As a historian, he describes the responsibility of representing trauma by warning of the complexity of engagement:

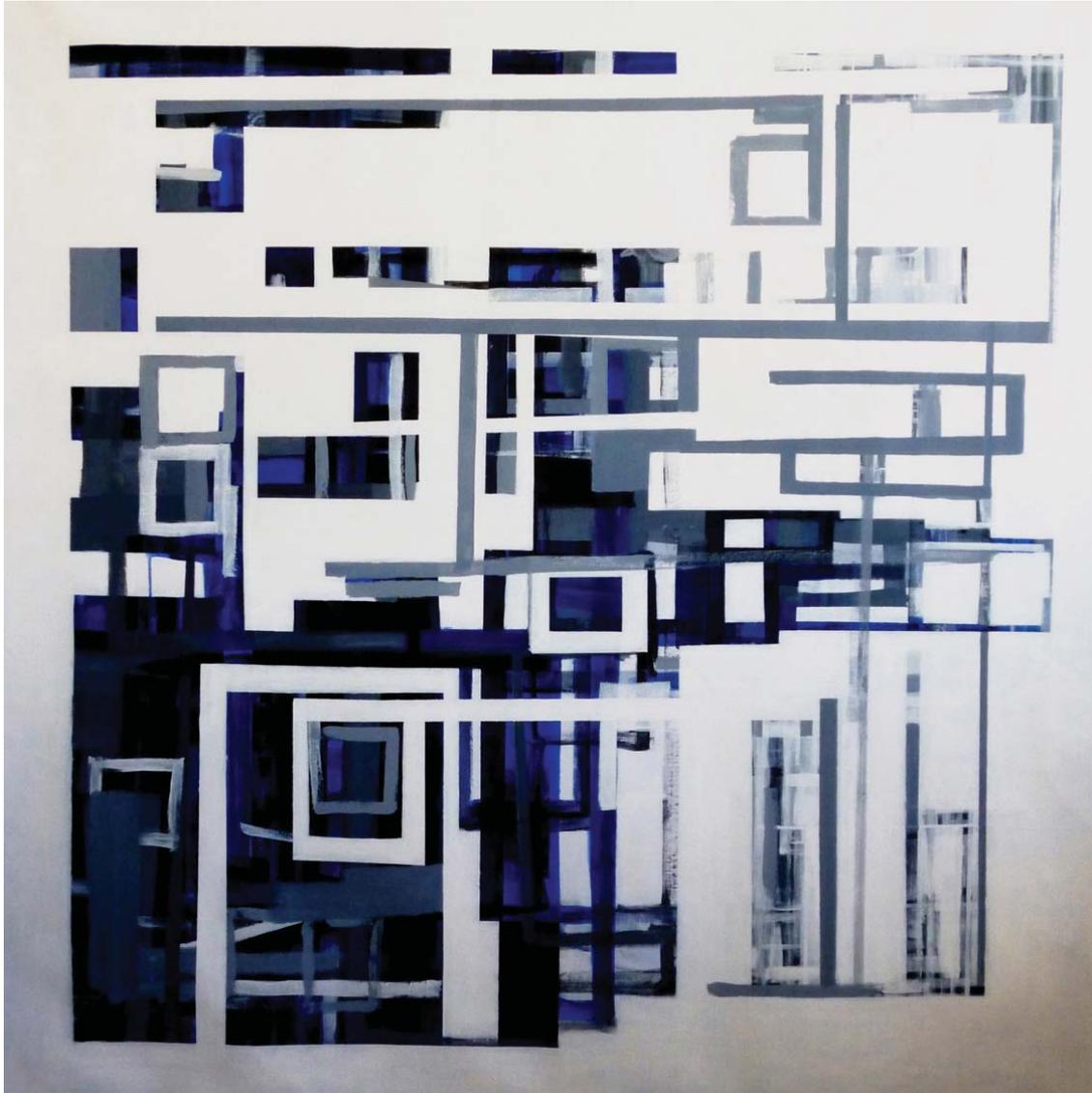
One's relation to every other – instead of involving a tense, at times paradoxical, interaction of proximity and distance, solidarity and criticism, trust and wariness—may be figured on the model of one's anxiety-ridden 'relation without relation' to a radically transcendent (now perhaps recognized as absent) divinity who is totally other.<sup>13</sup>

For divinity, we might substitute "mentor," "hero," "authority figure," or "utopian ideal." When caught in the experiential abyss of trauma, our relation to others suffers to the same extent as our relation to our own past self: a '*relation without relation*' recognized as absent. No Prince. Disconnected from the past, in a perpetual *unbelonging* – existence holds the persistence of exile. And while Jabès reconciles loss with fullness as evidence of the divine, for others trauma descends upon them like the ruins of catastrophe. Those who can, rebuild.

In *Reconstrucción* from 2014, Álvarez uses the coloration of the sky as it appears on gray, overcast days, from piercing blue reflections on the sea to the white light of hot midday, all the way into the deepest impenetrability of a night in childhood far from the ubiquitous glow of today's urban sprawl. The blank canvas remains in evidence across the top and down the right third, even into the center of the square space while density is built up in scattered quadrants, particularly in the lower left corner where layers hold the square in a cool but thick blanket of control. We could be looking at the floor plan of architectural blueprints, layers of construction crowding the urban

landscape, but also, and always, windows, passageways, and doors. The space is penetrable. A bird enters the window in order to clean the floor of crumbs, removing the traces of the daily ritual of breaking bread, its trajectory an invisible pattern across the floor.

Hanging in my small, New York City studio is an early photograph by the artist of a New England ice cream parlor whose façade is entirely veiled by curtains waving in a light breeze. Produced in 1999 when her practice was largely photographic, it is prescient to the permeability of



**Figure 5**

María Elena Álvarez, *Reconstrucción*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 150x150cm

Image courtesy of the artist.

boundaries and the passage across internal psychological and external physical realms that would later dominate her work. In late 2000, when living in Brooklyn, she built a fabric house that hung from the ceiling – its walls transparent scrim. She lived in it for two months and then exhibited it at the Latin Collector in New York City in 2001.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, she had returned to Caracas where she built another (fabric) house within a house. She lived in this one for a year. The room eventually

became her studio but had originally been her parents' bedroom – a room of procreation. A space of creativity and reconstruction.

As an artist, Álvarez began by floating from one medium to the next, making use of visual languages according to the conditions of communicability. But representation, in a figurative sense, gradually folded into abstraction. This coincided not only with a return home but the protective layering of a home within a home. A home built on and from vulnerability. A zone of play and secrecy descendent from (descendant of) the make-believe of childhood. How does one emerge from hiding? One cultivates the internal resilience necessary to maintain an open and permeable relation to the outside world. These are the makings of an *inner architecture*, a guiding structure of internal resolve – interstitial – occupying the spaces in between belonging and *unbelonging*; a turning of the *inside out*, internalizing the structural strength of building, externalizing memory.

What consequence of words augurs the silence of abstraction? Álvarez's trauma is personal rather than historical, her symptoms neurotic related to the home and subject formation, but how absolute are these distinctions of severity or significance? The public trauma of September 11<sup>th</sup> triggered for some the resurgence of long repressed personal traumas. The untenable economic and political crisis in Venezuela renders precarious all layers of existence from the day-to-day to aspirations for the future.<sup>15</sup> Through the disappointment of ideals vanquished, heroes degraded, and expectations crushed, there remains the visibility – indeed, the viability – of lines: *arms open, in claims, in prayers, in self-defense*.<sup>16</sup> Lines, words, and the vision of a bird entering the home in a secular scene of annunciation. These are the saving graces of creativity: a means to explore the complexity of – indeed the proximity between – *acting out* and *working through* trauma.<sup>17</sup> La Capra's "interaction of proximity and distance, solidarity and criticism, trust and wariness" is reminiscent of D.W. Winnicott's assessment of the seemingly contradictory nature of the mature being:

The Truly responsible people of the world [are] those who accept the fact of their own hate, nastiness, cruelty, things which co-exist with their capacity to love and to construct.<sup>18</sup>

*To accept* but also to take responsibility for... In holding a nation accountable for this same transparency, Álvarez claims the imaginative space of reconstruction. In 2013, she offered a painting to her brother who is an architect from which he was to devise a house. They called the project *Casa Relato (Story House)*. If we understand this as the viability of psychic experience, then we might see



**Figure 6**  
 Maria Elena Álvarez, *Untitled (Ice Cream Parlor)*, 1999, gelatin silver print  
 framed  
 Photo by Kathleen MacQueen, courtesy of the artist.

*Reconstrucción* as a proposal for the rebuilding of a nation. Together they represent the inside and outside of experience. This for Jabès is the other side of the question: *It means we forever turn the inside out, set it free, revel in its freedom, and die of it.* We also discover the resolve not to make things right, or even whole, but to fashion an open window out of a wall of silence.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 7**

María Elena Álvarez and Lorenzo Álvarez, *Casa Relato*, 2013

Photo by Carolina Toro, courtesy of the artists

## **PART II. IN AND OUT OF HISTORY HOUSE: GWENESSA LAM'S LOOKING DEVICES**

The Álvarez siblings referred to their project as Story House and sought an imaginative space of reconstruction within it. Another pair of siblings, fraternal twins Rahel and Esthappen, in fictionalized post-Independence India in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), had a project of their own at a place they called History House. The two additional letters change entirely the significance of what the house could hold for them in its deep recesses and small crevices. For the twins, History House was a chosen place of refuge, the place they promised to meet after taking flight from their home. But the forces of history that haunt the abandoned house, which had at one point been occupied by an Englishman who supposedly went mad and became “native,” as though in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, eventually swallowed them whole. In History House, they were forced to witness history's cruel vindication – state-sanctioned police violence on society's weakest.

Prior to the twins' flight, there was a poetic moment of confusion in the story when their uncle, not knowing the twins' escape plan, spoke metaphorically of History House, the imagined space that has already determined each one of their places within and without it. The English

colonialists, the upper-caste Anglophile Indians, and the unspoken but certainly implied presence of Untouchables.

But we can't go in... because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering because our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost... A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them.<sup>20</sup>

A war that they won, through independence of India in 1947, but also lost – lost in that they dream re-captured dreams. Roy spins a tale of colonial violence and trauma in this oneiric state to address specifically the deeply entrenched problems of the caste system – Love Laws, as she calls them, that define who can love whom, who can touch whom. In the novel, the loss of the loved one is real. The twins and their mother must face the murder of a man they loved, an Untouchable house-servant, bright-eyed and clear-headed communist, for the precise reason that they loved him too much. The promise of communism, an imported ideal, is broken, as the state punitive and justice system previously buttressed by the colonial administration acts only to reinforce the existent social hierarchy. The trauma is personal but it is also part of a larger historical narrative that gets re-lived and re-narrated through multiple generations. The characters struggle in the places they are assigned by history, and in their struggle, end up burrowing themselves deep within.

Psychologically charged spaces of interiority, as well as history of colonial violence and its ruinous remnants, are often the subject of artist Gwenessa Lam's work. In place of Roy's artistry in story-telling, Lam paints spaces that evoke ungraspable and indescribable angst, spaces that appear hermetically sealed and give the viewers the illusion of being locked within them. Her earliest series of paintings *Windows* marks the beginning of a decade-long art practice through which she explores intensely inward and meditative state of mind but with a look at an unknown horizon faraway. The paintings that comprise the series *Windows* depict just that: front and center on the canvas, the window is painted lavishly in oil as though it is a camera's aperture in an otherwise completely dark chamber. While the window is a recurring motif in art history that signals the world beyond, Lam's windows decidedly reveal nothing. It is an opening through which to look out onto something unknown, a pure bank of light.

Lam's rendering of the windows is realistic, unlike the suggestive but firmly drawn lines that evoke thresholds in Álvarez's



**Figure 8**  
Gwenessa Lam, *Window no. 9*, 2009, oil on canvas,  
54x36in, 137x91cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

drawings and paintings. They are so tightly rendered and sharply in focus that they instead draw our eyes to the luscious black of the room. Whereas Álvarez directs our attention to the overall structure created by the intersecting lines, Lam's canvas leaves us with two options – either stare out the window and wonder what exists outside, or indulge in the darkness of the room. In this way, Lam paints a looking device, a camera obscura, a dark chamber through which the world outside is abstracted into a reductive sampling of the visible.

Through pockets of words, Álvarez elaborates her process of visualization and reconstruction. Lam does not offer us such words, so we follow the trajectory of the works that came after *Windows* to glean clues that tell us what she has been looking at through the painted aperture. Lam's chambers are like the box with a hole that the pilot draws in Antoine de Saint-Éxupéry's novel *The Little Prince*. The reader will never fully know the perfect sheep the Little Prince demanded the pilot to draw. Instead, we have a small window into a field and an idea of what it is that the Little Prince sought. We never see the shape and the details of the sheep, but we go along with the prince on his journey. So we follow Lam to her next series, *Shadows*.

In an inverse of the dark chambers of *Windows*, this series is comprised of white canvases disturbed only by gray shadows of chairs. The chairs themselves are not visible, and their shadows



**Figure 9**  
Gwenessa Lam, *Chair Shadow no. 2*, 2010, oil on canvas,  
30x20in, 76x51cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

remain as ghostly apparitions. It is as though the intense light that is casting the shadows has burnt away the objects themselves. *What violence was done to obliterate the material form of the objects? Did the light burn away the chair itself in the process of casting the long shadow? Upon entering this space, will I, as a viewer/participant be subject to the same violence? There are only shadowy traces in the quiet of the room, and no firm grasp on that destructive force haunting the space that Lam has created.*<sup>21</sup> Uncertain of how one can enter and leave, this room – like History House – is filled with a vague sense of threat.

In between the blinding light of *Shadows* and the total darkness of *Windows*, there's an acknowledgement of both creative and destructive forces at play. This inverse relationship to light and darkness is stretched to an atomic proportion in *Flash Burn*, a series of painted white silhouettes representing historic Chinese vases. We know that the silhouettes are Qing, Ming, and Song dynasty vases only because the title of individual paintings denotes the subject matter. What we see on the canvas are museum alcoves, a holding place reserved for an object taken from another culture, through conquest and pillage. They are artifacts held captive, stored far away in time and place, whispering their inaudible tales as though in a dream. But rather than represent these objects as admirable

examples of cultures of the temporal and geographic other, Lam offers us a white impression of their former whole. It is as though they are eradicated by a bomb so powerful that in a flash they have become mere outlines in the alcoves. In this way, the hazy white marks are like the shadows of absent chairs in Lam's previous series. We are left wondering about the violent force that eliminated the vases, and the chairs. But here, we begin to have more specific references and clues: the term flash burn is used to describe the effects of atomic bombs, and Qing, Ming, and Song dynasties give



**Figure 10**

Gwenessa Lam, *Flash Burn* series, 2012, installation view, oil on canvas  
Image courtesy of the artist.

us geographic and temporal coordinates. Thus, the violence of the world outside of the window begins to take rough shape.

*Windows, passageways, and doors. The space is penetrable.* What is said of Álvarez's work can also be said of Lam's, except that in Lam's case, we see the disintegrated material remnants of the cultural other. Whereas Álvarez's passageways lead us to a Venezuelan sky disrupted by the sounds of jets and protesters, Lam's windows lead us out onto a winding path from a light filled room, to museum alcoves, to architectural ruins of *diaolou* in Guongdong, China in a series titled *Mongrel Histories*. Built mostly in the first few decades of the nineteenth century by Chinese emigrants who returned or sent money home from working as coolies in North America, *diaolou* buildings were hybrids that combined elements of western architecture (such as minarets and Greek columns) with more vernacular ones, such as pagodas. They dotted the Guongdong region like watchtowers at a time when banditry was rampant. Mostly abandoned now in post-Cultural Revolution Communist China, these buildings stand as bearers of different family history, and local lore, often weaving in stories of war, robbery, and other violent intrusions against which the *diaolou* were supposed to stand en guard.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 11**

Gwenessa Lam, *Falling Tower*,  
2013, graphite on paper, 37  
3/4x27 1/2in, 96x70cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Lam's diaolous are rendered in fragments – tops toppling over, towers invaded by a dust cloud, domed minarets coupled together upside down and right side up. They float in an empty space and their fragmentation signifies almost a century of time that did damage to these buildings. There is a sense of placelessness to Lam's diaolou. Originally, a diaolou was a hope-filled space, an idealized home for generations, constructed with the hard earned cash of Chinese coolies. It is utopian both in its intention and in its function as an island of refuge in a landscape riddled with violence.

*Within the experience and the consequences of trauma, the signified (as meaning) is troubled territory and any reference to the signifier (as archetype) becomes suspect.* The signifiers in diaolou are jumbled to begin with. Architectural vocabulary of various origins is used helter-skelter to create a mongrel no-place space.

Developed concurrently with the series *Mongrel Histories* is yet another body of work in which Lam charts an *unheimlich* space filled with various shadowy shapes – suspect signifiers.

In a series titled *Landfall*, she depicts the shadows of ordinary objects that she culled from various news images of destroyed homes and buildings. Closely cropped, the objects float in an empty space. Her titles indicate that these objects are survivors, however mangled and mutated, of various man-made and natural disasters: *Blockade (Alexandria, Egypt)*; *Chairs (Syrian Embassy, Cairo)*; and *Mound (Katrina)*. A tipping sofa, a twisted bedframe, what was once a fence or a railing splayed out like the rib cage of a rotting carcass on a field. The details are unnecessary as Lam presents mere outlines of shadows traced with much finesse onto the white ground. As though in Plato's cave, the objects beg identification through the shadows they cast.



**Figure 12**

Gwenessa Lam, *Blockade (Alexandria, Egypt)*, 2013, graphite on paper, 36x42in, 91x107cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

They are still life paintings in the truest sense of the term. Nature-morte, stilled life. Absent from the paintings are the whirlwind of activities associated with such detritus – a violent storm or a heated political riot. Taken from the frozen moment captured in a photograph, the subject is extracted from its environment and distilled down to its singular object status. They become abstracted in form and are painted using graphite powder, applied directly on either paper or dry wall, as was the case with *Mongrel Histories*. The fussy, loose, and hard-to-control graphite powder that has to be patted down repeatedly to create various densities of black also adds to the resonant strength of the silence and the stillness of the images. Holding our breath, the closer we get to the paintings, the more we see of the million fine grains that sit still to form these images in front of our eyes: various precarious arrangements of furniture somehow held together in tension, but perpetually on the verge of collapse. Unlike Alvarez's resolute lines that ground her and her practice in the politically turbulent Venezuela, Lam finds another way to navigate the violence of the world that she encounters second-hand, mediated by a screen – a television, a computer, a hand-held device. She recognizes that there is a great distance between her as the creator of the image and the subject of her paintings, ever so out of immediate grasp.

Perhaps that is why Lam depicts fleeting shadows of these destroyed objects in the moment of their fall – stretched and angled, rotated and transformed in their shape. She creates an empty volume; what is inside is filled by us, the viewers who pore through the darkness. The paintings are visually compelling in their sheer emptiness. Whether it be on canvas, paper, or on the wall, she represents the abstracted trace of the still life that she meditates on, and in turn, invites others to meditate. In the process of selecting and distilling the images of violence and tragedy from daily news, she slows down her image-consumption, and gives them due time for reflection as she laboriously paints with graphite powder. She extends the encounter with images that would normally flash up on television and computers screens for seconds, with information that demands equally quick absorption. Bombing in Syria. Hurricane in New Orleans. The news channels offer a miserly allowance of time devoted to understanding the political circumstances of any given tragedy.

In a post 9/11 image world, the question of how we deal with other people's trauma and the events we experience second-hand takes on an urgency to which Lam responds. Her painted shadows beg identification, and their corresponding objects bring up questions about their user. Who sat on this chair? Who laid on the bed? Who lived in the house? Short of taking on an anthropomorphic resonance, the objects that the shadows index allude to the bodies that once used and cared for them, and in their destroyed state, bear the mark of violence that tore through their living space. Lam's paintings are personal responses to catastrophic events in the context of a larger, shared, cultural condition of violence. As is often the case with the most traumatic of events, the abyssal incongruity between the event and its representation must be acknowledged. It is here that we can give shape, volume, and words to the trauma (the fear of or actual loss), the full impact of which is often belated and has the effect of haunting.

For Jacques Derrida, writing in *Memoirs of the Blind*, he likens drawing to a story of memory. Using the multiple meanings of the French word '*trait*' deftly, going from a "trace" to a "line" to a "trait." He writes:

Even if drawing is ... reproductive, figurative, representative,... the trait must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it is not yet visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 13**

Gwenessa Lam, *Jianming Tower (Study)*, 2014, graphite on paper, 31x45in, 79x114cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

For the French deconstructionist, the term spectacle is effective in retaining its ghostly root. According to Derrida, spectral image, the image that haunts the draft person's memory, forms the base of the tracing. This is certainly the case for Lam, who embraces the haunting as she spends hours turning the seared memory into a visual depiction. Left unsaid in Derrida's statement, however, is that this memory itself undergoes changes. It is vulnerable and mutable, particularly in extraordinary circumstances such as in times of disasters and in the fading memories of once inhabited spaces like the diaolou in Guongdong.

Derrida then adds, "The heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing trait remain abyssal... The night of this abyss can be interpreted in two ways, either as the eve or the memory of the day, that is, as a reserve of visibility... or else as radically and definitively foreign to the phenomenality of the day. This heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible can haunt the visible at its very possibility."<sup>24</sup> This rumination on the relationship between the ghostly image in one's mind and the actual image rendered on paper provides useful access points to reading Lam's work.

Lam is an avid looker, interested in the process of looking itself. Rather than engage in the immediate commerce of instantaneous image circulation in our hyper-visual twenty-first century, she wants to look at things askew rather than squarely. Her approach resonates with the sidelong glance described in Socrates's *Phaedo*, in which he writes:



**Figure 14**  
 Gwenessa Lam, *Cluster no. 6*  
 (*Shaonian*), 2014, graphite  
 on paper, 24x18in,  
 61x46cm  
 Image courtesy of the  
 artist.

...since I had given up investigating the things that are, I decided that I must be careful not to suffer the misfortune that happens to people who look at the sun and watch it during an eclipse. For some of them ruin their eyes unless they look at its image in water or something of the sort. I thought of that danger, and I was afraid my soul would be blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with any of my senses. So I thought I must have recourse to *logoi* and examine in them the truth of the things that are.<sup>25</sup>

The sidelong glance described above moves us from the question of how we visualize that which is difficult to see to its counter-question, how do we see that which is difficult to visualize, and from which we want to avert our gaze? We may see these images of tragedy to the point of intoxication. Yet, there must be an acknowledgement that we do not have equal access to the experience of these

tragedies. We must look at the reflections, and reflect on the reflections. It is like standing at a place assigned to us by history. Only some of us can enter History House.

### PART III. LINES AND DOTS: FOR WHEN TRAUMA RETURNS

Today there is a general tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma: a *lingua trauma* is spoken in popular culture, academic discourse, and art and literary world. Many contemporary novelists... conceive experience in this paradoxical modality: experience that is *not* experienced, at least not punctually, that comes too early or too late, that must be acted out compulsively or reconstructed after the fact, almost analytically.<sup>26</sup>

So writes art historian Hal Foster in “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” in which he suggests “the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic.”<sup>27</sup> The return of the repressed real as trauma places the postmodern subject in a paradoxical position: “the subject is evacuated and elevated at once”<sup>28</sup> – La Capra’s *radically transcendent other*. Both emptied out, and upheld, present and absent. It is a sort of spectrality, one that lingers in the haunting spaces created by cultural producers today – those distant from but connected to trauma and those living through it. But Hal Foster’s fin-de-siècle “despair about the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime, a destroyed welfare state, indeed a broken social contract,”<sup>29</sup> while not absolved, has given way to a post-9/11 emphasis on the erasure of place, the dislocation and eradication of entire populations and obliterated civilizations. The subject lost to the scorched earth, left homeless and adrift. The body a mere inference on the page.

This is the no/place of Lam’s diolou and museum alcoves and Álvarez’s passageways. More precisely, Lam’s subject matter is the destruction of the materials that once occupied the spaces she visualizes – vanished chairs, atomized vases, collapsing buildings. Through this implied destruction, she metaphorically creates clearings in troubled territory, where she re-imbues suspect signifiers with a possibility of reconstruction. Lam makes sense of the chaos of destruction by attempting to fix the fleeting forms of shadows using fine grains of graphite powder. She makes use of the same elemental material, carbon that is found on scorched earth, in sites of trauma. Álvarez, on the other hand, finds clearings for the purpose of reconstruction. She draws vertical lines intersecting the horizon as though they were surveyor stakes driven into the ground, charting an empty lot. Or perhaps they are the scaffolding that creates and embraces an empty volume that gradually gets filled in. *Lines as the lowest common denominator; like writing, if left with nothing, there is a blank, the page... On the emptiness of a page – double for the body – the lines representative of the losses entering the body, or, perhaps, not the losses themselves, but the structure necessary to sustain them.* Also, dots stand in for the ashes on the ground, ready to be scattered by an intentional gust, so that they make room for the lines.

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<sup>1</sup> The first person pronoun refers to the author, Kathleen MacQueen, who knew the artist in the 1990s and has resumed contact after losing contact with her for about fifteen years.

<sup>2</sup> María Elena Álvarez, email correspondence with the author, Kathleen MacQueen, January 10, 2014. I am indebted to this correspondence for stimulating my thoughts on abstraction.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 105, quoted in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 144. Jameson, in reference to the products of post-industrial capitalism, suggests that “their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy.”

<sup>4</sup> María Elena Álvarez, email correspondence with the author, March 31, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the block quotes are from the artist’s letter drawing of April 3, 2014. I have corrected spelling and occasionally added a word in brackets for clarification.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Bélgica Rodríguez, “María Elena Álvarez: Galería 39” in *ArtNexus* 92 (March-May 2014), 77.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967), 465-9.

<sup>9</sup> For information on Venezuela’s recent instability see Sibylla Brodzinsky, “Street protests loom as shortages, inflation and oil slump hit Venezuela,” *The Guardian*, 16 January 2015, as well as The Associated Press, Caracas, “Venezuela divisions deepen as protest over food shortages is halted,” *The Guardian*, 8 March 2014, and Anatoly Kurmanaev and Corina Rodríguez Pons, “Venezuela Inflation Hits 16-Year High as Shortages Rise,” *BloombergBusiness*, November 7, 2013. For data on Venezuela’s literacy, corruption, and crime rates, see Transparency International, [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org) (last accessed March 14, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See A. E. Hotchner, “Hemingway, Hounded by the Feds,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/02/opinion>>. Anne P. DePrince and Jennifer J. Freyd discuss the importance in recognizing the entire context of traumatic response and not just fear internalized by the individual in “The Harm of Trauma: Pathological Fear, Shattered Assumptions, or Betrayal?” 71-82. For the difficulty in separating reality from paranoid ideation, see Sandra L. Bloom, “Beyond the Beveled Mirror: Mourning and Recovery from Childhood Maltreatment,” 146, both in J. Kauffman, ed. *Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Jabès, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Dominique La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23-4.

<sup>14</sup> This pre-dates Do Ho Suh’s *The Perfect Home* (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Greg Grandin adds an alternate perspective to the usual neo-liberal, anti-Chavista bias prominent in Western media with a report from a panel of nine experts in “What is happening in Venezuela?” *The Nation*, 2 March 2015. They insist that the barrios have not abandoned the state capitalism of the Bolivarian project and that the wealthy class is supporting the opposition. Such a scenario squeezes the middle class between two polarized forces. It’s not a catastrophe such as Syria and Mexico represent today but it is a volatile crisis.

<sup>16</sup> According to the “shattered assumptions” theory introduced in the mid-90s by Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, extreme disillusionment that results in upsetting a familiar worldview and leads to confusion and uncertainty can result in trauma;

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this sense of betrayal can be on the part of an individual or an institution on which the individual depended for survival. See A.P. DePrince and J.J. Freyd, "The Harm of Trauma," 71-82.

<sup>17</sup> Primary to the notion of "acting out" and "working through" trauma is D.W. Winnicott's theory of play and the transitional object, which serves to displace anxiety until the child (or later the adult individual suffering from trauma) has retrieved his/her capacity for maintaining a true self. See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1971 and 2005).

<sup>18</sup> D.W. Winnicott, (1965, *The Family and Individual Development*) quoted in Davis, Madeleine and David Wallbridge. *Boundary and Space: An Introduction to the Work of D.W. Winnicott* (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1981), 154.

<sup>19</sup> María Elena Álvarez's *Reconstrucción*, 2014 (acrylic on canvas, 150x150cm) was awarded the Armando Reverón Prize at this year's Bienal Salón Arturo Michelena, the oldest and most prestigious cultural event in Venezuela. According to an email message from the artist (dated November 11, 2014) the award holds special significance for her because of Reverón's own struggle with mental illness.

<sup>20</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 53.

<sup>21</sup> This discussion of the work is quoted from the author's previous text on the work of Gwenessa Lam, written for the artist's exhibition catalogue. Liz Park, "Unfixed Images," *Gwenessa Lam: 2004-2014* (Vancouver: Republic Gallery, 2014), 6.

<sup>22</sup> The history of the *diaolon* is discussed in the context of *Mongrel Histories* in a previous text on the work of Gwenessa Lam, written for the artist's exhibition catalogue. Kathleen MacQueen, "Upturned Archives: Gwenessa Lam's *Mongrel Histories*," in *Gwenessa Lam: 2004-2014* (Vancouver: Republic Gallery, 2014), 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and other Ruins* [1990], trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> As quoted by Derrida in footnote 7, in *Memoirs of the Blind*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (1996), 123.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 122.