

Oh, The humanity!

Cast out of heaven for being sinful or defiant, “fallen angels” plummet to earth. Dulce Chacón invokes this religious context and uses the term for the title of her exhibition, referring to those adventurous humans compelled to conquer the elements and explore regions beyond the gravitational pull of this planet, despite life-threatening risks. The artist proposes that pursuits into air and space essentially amount to escapism, a desire to look past the complex problems of this deeply troubled world. The quest of these enterprising searchers is based in a faith and trust that somewhere out there exists a utopian world and a new religion. ¹

Chacón has long been intrigued by the “great beyond”—the realm of engineers, scientists, inventors, pilots, astronauts, and daredevils—and how various spectacles of human flight are documented by the news media and filtered by memory. She responds to them with meticulous fluid drawings produced in series. Beginning with a specific subject or event, she conducts research, building a cache of print and digital images culled from publications and the internet. Chacón then translates selected images into her signature ink wash drawings, developing a visual narrative to be displayed sequentially, in groupings or linear order across gallery walls. She often focuses on incidents that have saturated the mass media and shaped the collective memory of a generation. For her MATRIX project, she presents four series of drawings based on acoustic location devices (1910s to 1940s), the Hindenburg airship disaster (1937), International Space Station expeditions (2012-15), and daredevil Felix Baumgartner’s free fall from space (2012). With each series, Chacón “uses the materiality and capacity to understand and create a form of ‘present’ which drawing allows. In this manner, the work assembles lived experience with found information, creating multiple and indeterminate versions of reality.” ²

“Sound Locators” is a series of thirteen drawings based on photographs of different sound-enhancement technology used in World War I and World War II before the development of radar. The curious and clunky contraptions were invented to locate the sounds of approaching enemy aircraft. For thirty years, the German, Czech, Dutch, French, British, and American military designed and built a wide variety of absurd-looking apparatuses. Personal sound locators assumed the form of giant ear prosthetics. Mobile, trailer-mounted versions featured multiple cones projecting skyward. A single monumental horn attached to a rotational device attained the scale of a small observatory. The “Sound Locators” conjure comparisons with medieval torture devices or objects from a dystopian future, the world of Mad Max films. ³ However, once the height of technology, the now laughable inventions could easily be seen as the product of Chacón’s wild imagination. The drawings float on the sheets of paper like vignettes, lending a surreal quality to the quirky group.

Also approaching the unreal, the 1937 newsreel of the Hindenburg zeppelin disaster is renowned. While attempting to make a landing in Lakehurst, New Jersey, after a transatlantic crossing, the German passenger airship abruptly caught fire and burned completely in thirty-four short seconds. Of the ninety-six passengers and crew members on board, thirty-four perished. The dramatic incineration was

captured on film by William Deeke of Pathé News and broadcast the next day, and later overdubbed with the eyewitness radio recording of reporter Herbert Morrison. His spontaneous exclamation, “Oh, the humanity!” contributed to this becoming one of the most famous broadcasts in the history of radio journalism. The wave of the future in air travel quickly became a thing of the past. Generations of people have seen this haunting film and heard this moving account. Almost eighty years later, Chacón condenses the drama of the iconic film into six sequential film stills, appropriated for the series “Hindenburg.” Chacón is an alchemist who magically recreates the inferno—the weightless dirigible, violent flames, and dense smoke—with simply water and ink on paper.

The exhibition title “Fallen Angels” is also the name of a series of six drawings focused primarily on astronauts and cosmonauts who have just returned to Earth after extended stays at the International Space Station (ISS). Chacón is interested in the astronaut as a god and a hero, a rare human being who is selfless, willing to risk his or her life in the name of science. In addition, the community of the International Space Station exists outside the strained relationships of world politics. Sixteen countries work on the ISS. In 2014, a Russian, an Italian, and an American astronaut launched from Russia for a six-month expedition. For her drawings, though, Chacón concentrates on the strange media photographs of the astronauts immediately following their safe return to Earth. The ordinary, rural landing sites contrast sharply with fantastic visions of outer space. The otherworldly capsules seem out of place in scrubby fields, and the astronauts engage in curious interactions. Her recreation of a group photo of the three astronauts and their teams draws out the oddness of the image. The astronauts are separated and seated in portable lawn chairs, while being assessed. Some are on cell phones. It is staged like a frieze with the individuals lined up frontally across the page, engrossed in sub-narratives. Chacón likens the scene to Leonardo da Vinci’s masterpiece *The Last Supper* (1495-1498) in content and arrangement. The central Christ figure is being attended by the Apostles, as they also interact in smaller groups across the linear plane. 4

A single, large drawing included in the series “Fallen Angels” reproduces a photograph of a suicide victim that was so powerful it made “Picture of the Week” in *LIFE* magazine. 5 Twenty-three-year-old Evelyn McHale jumped to her death from the Empire State Building in 1947. Having landed on her back, her angelic face and supine body appear largely undisturbed. She seems to be sleeping soundly, although embedded in the twisted metal roof of the black limousine she struck. She is both a sacrificial lamb and a mortal sinner. Chacón’s ink drawing technique offers beautiful watery passages of abstraction and fully reconciled areas of linear detail, capturing the dualities of the magnificent and disturbing floating portrait of death. The power of the composition is timeless and has endured. Looking back in time, Pre-Raphaelite Sir John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (c. 1851) similarly depicts the still-lovely drowned heroine of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Later, Pop artist Andy Warhol repeated the media image of McHale sixteen times in *Suicide (Fallen Body)* (1962) from his “Death and Disaster” series.

In a different kind of jump, Austrian daredevil Felix Baumgartner attempted to break the world record for the longest free fall from near-space in 2012. A highly publicized media event (sponsored by Red Bull, Zenith Swiss Watch Company, and GoPro action cameras), his stunt was broadcast live on YouTube, 6 from which Chacón sourced forty-four video stills that became the drawings in “Zenith.” Arranged in groupings that cluster, climb, and drop along the gallery wall, the narrative series chronologically traces the extreme skydiver’s journey: his launch, rise, jump, free fall, and landing. Baumgartner ascended to twenty-four miles above Earth in a capsule raised by a helium balloon, while maintaining audiovisual contact with mission control. Along with the drawings, Chacón includes texts, actual statements made by Baumgartner and his team that read like canned lines, including “Sometimes you have to go up real high to see how small you are” and “Keep your head down, and our Guardian Angel will take care of you.” But the text-bubble drawings go silent with Baumgartner’s jump into the void, a mind-boggling free fall of four minutes and twenty-two seconds before he pulled the ripcord and descended safely onto terra firma. Chacón captures the adventure in arresting images that range in style from highly realistic to loosely suggestive, from sharp focus to distant blurs, adjusted as needed to best approximate the source image. In particular, the “Zenith” drawings hover on sheets of paper with irregular perimeters, heightening the dreamlike effect as they float across the dark blue wall, evoking the heavens.

Dulce Chacón translates photographic images—often well-known media images and events—into drawing, bringing the claim of photography as truth immediately into question. By changing mediums and building provocative displays, she causes the representation of reality to become unstable, and she further complicates perception by building thematic and narrative series that are framed to highlight humankind’s eccentricities. “Hindenburg” presents a surreal reenactment of a fiery tragedy in six watery drawings. “Fallen Angels” proposes a religious context within the space program and probes a famous media image of a beautiful suicide victim that romanticizes death. “Sound Locators” illustrates how technological advancements have profoundly changed our military capabilities. And finally, in the epic, true adventure of “Zenith,” Dulce Chacón creates a fantastic and lingering visual experience of a free fall from space, far removed from the live action of YouTube.

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