

DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

HYPERALLERGIC

The Music Must Go On

By John Yau

April 10, 2016



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "Momento Efímero (Fleeting Moment)" (2016), graphite on paper, wax, 30 3/4 x 42 1/4 inches (all images © Sandra Vásquez de la Horra and courtesy David Nolan Gallery, New York)

I don't think it is hard to understand why Sandra Vásquez de la Horra's pencil drawings depict dejected, often isolated figures from a domain that is simultaneously fairy tale, horror story, and dream. She was born into a conservative Catholic family in Chile in 1967, and grew up during Augusto Pinochet's murderous, 17-year military rule (1973–1990), studying typography and graphic design. She also began a deep engagement with literature, including such writers as the innovative and insubordinate Chilean poet, Nicanor Parra, who wrote:

United States: the country where
Liberty is a statue.
(translated by Anna Deeny)



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "Componen sus Ritmos (Compose their Rhythms)" (2016), graphite and watercolor on paper, wax 42 1/4 x 30 3/4 inches

In 1995, at the age of 28, Vásquez de la Horra moved to Germany to study at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. It is here — in a country that is hospitable to artists who only draw, such as Hanns Schimansky and Jorinde Voight — that she began to develop her post-symbolist figurative drawings on paper, which she coats in buttery yellow beeswax and pins to the wall.

How does one negotiate the formative period of one's life — address the daily personal torments and public violence that was part of her daily life — while also seeking distance, a feeling of safety? The artist continues to answer this pressing question in her most recent exhibition, *Sandra Vásquez de la Horra: Crossroads* at David Nolan (March 18–April 30, 2016), while also reminding us that we should resist — or at least question — our tendency toward reductive readings. Just as it was once fashionable to empty meaning and much else out of art, now the opposite is true: meaning is shoehorned into art whenever and wherever possible.

In her third exhibition at David Nolan, the artist moved away from modestly sized sheets of paper, often arranged closely together in non-narrative sequences, to exhibiting large drawings done on three separate sheets, which are stacked vertically on the wall. She also began to construct simple house-like structures out of folded, scored and cut paper, which are either affixed to the wall — like a tabernacle — or placed on a pedestal, sometimes further enclosed by a bell jar.



Installation view of "Sandra Vásquez de la Horra: Crossroads" (2016), David Nolan Gallery, New York (photo by Thomas Müller)

In the triptych drawing "Las Frecuencias (Frequencies)" (2016), Vásquez de la Horra employs graphite and watercolor to depict an androgynous figure with red-veined hands playing a keyless piano, which also happens to be on fire, which further complicates our reading of this arresting image. What distinguishes Vásquez de la Horra's work from others working in a highly charged personal vein is that her images escape any literal reading, while inviting multiple, contradictory interpretations. Did the music the figure is playing ignite the piano? Does being an artist mean that you play the piano even as the world burns down around you? What about the red veins that scar the pianist's hands, recalling something organic and raw?

Looking at Vásquez de la Horra's work, one cannot finally decide whether it is about this or that. Moreover, by coating the image in softly glowing yellow beeswax, she suggests that it may one day destroy itself, burn its way through the wax. This merging of subject matter and materiality folds another possible reading into the work, as does the fact that the drawing is done on three separate sheets that can be easily taken down and packed away. The combination of mobility, wax (as a form of protection) and volatile imagery conveys a sense that instability and chaos are inherent to everything.

Vásquez de la Horra conveys her own sense of impending destruction in "Momento Efímero (Fleeting Moment)" (2016), a graphite drawing of another pianist, this time a silhouette seated at a grand piano, completely consumed by flames. In the paper sculpture of a house, "El Sueño del Árbol Rojo (The Dream of the Red Tree)" 2016, the artist covers the surface with the red outlines of leaf-like shapes, each of which is filled with wavy parallel lines (veins). Here and there within this field the artist has drawn a graphite circle containing the image of a human fetus. While the image evokes birth, I think such a reading is too simple.



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "El Sueño del Árbol Rojo (The Dream of the Red Tree)" (2016), graphite and watercolor on paper, wax, 22 x 14 1/4 x 14 1/4 inches

In the sculpture, "El Laboratorio (The Laboratory)" 2016, the artist makes a simple house, which she covers with drawings of images and symbols associated with alchemy and other coded models. As we walk around the house, a narrative seems to emerge but, at the same time, remains reticent. Many of these images have been used by other artists to evoke mortality, death, and rebirth, but — against the odds — Vásquez de la Horra makes them hers.

At her best, Vásquez de la Horra makes work that cannot be quickly deciphered and does not seem in any way didactic. Someone is sitting at a burning piano trying to play music. Are we the audience or the performer? Will we — an individual or society — take heed of this drawing or not? Drawing seems perfectly suited to an artist who is conscious that nothing lasts forever but that paper can survive for centuries. Not only does the beeswax embalm and preserve the drawing, like a Fayun mummy portrait, it adds a sensuous layer of vulnerability. It invites our protection.