

## Echoes of the Past – Pedro Gómez-Egaña enters the Oslo Opera House

Bjørsvika, the innermost bay in the Oslo Fjord, has seen rapid transformation over the last few years. A new borough is emerging on the waterfront; multi-million *kroner* apartments vie for a view of sea with signature cultural buildings and tall office blocks adorned with acronyms. The area has been imagined through a series of architectural renderings, replete with idealized individuals each of a certain normative type. I don't know anyone who lives there; I only know a couple who have bought an apartment on the basis of a prospectus and are waiting to move in. Eagerly and apprehensively.

This as-yet-unfulfilled potentiality seems to capture the mood of Bjørsvika at this moment in time: suspended experience, delayed gratification. It is a liminal time, where the imagination can play unfettered by actual experience. It is not unlike the state of sleep paralysis that Pedro Gómez-Egaña adopts as an articulation point for his new commissioned piece *The Voice of Jacob at Dawn*. This state between sleep and waking in painting it is often depicted as a form of nightmare, perhaps most iconically captured by Henry Fuseli in his painting *The Nightmare* (1781). Works of art depicting variations on the same motif feature a beastly creature that sits on top of a sleeping woman's chest. Most of these scenes also feature a wild-eyed horse in the background, often mistakenly attributed to the etymology of "nightmare".<sup>1</sup> Sleep paralysis also features in literature, for example, in *Moby Dick* (1851), Herman Melville describes this state as following:

"At last I must have fallen into a troubled nightmare of a doze; and slowly waking from it- half steeped in dreams – I opened my eyes, and the before sunlit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bed-side. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery."<sup>2</sup>

Literary citations often feature in the work of Gómez-Egaña. In the first work of his I encountered in 2013, at Lofoten International Art Festival, *Maelstrom Observatory* was inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (1841). Together with three others, I was ushered into an old wooden shack and invited to sit on a bench. The shack was bare, save for a dark fabric that covered the cracks in the floor. As we sat in the darkness, a musical soundtrack and a voice with a Norwegian accent started up, describing our specific surroundings in the Lofoten archipelago. The speed and timbre of the narrator's voice rose and fell in time with the music, as his description gradually moved towards the tale of the mythical Mosknes Maelstrom. As the story unfolded, the fabric on the floor began to move, picking up speed as it gradually began to resemble a maelstrom, albeit on a small scale. The

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary traces the first used of "nightmare" in English to around 1300, as "a female spirit or monster supposed to settle on and produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal." See Merrill Perlman, 'The history of 'nightmare'', *Columbia Journalism Review* online (12 January 2015) for further elaboration: [https://archives.cjr.org/language\\_corner/the\\_history\\_of\\_nightmare.php](https://archives.cjr.org/language_corner/the_history_of_nightmare.php).

<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851), chapter 4.

effect was to increasingly let more light into the darkened space through the floor boards. It was only a 12-minute experience, but one that created profound emotional state and a lasting impression remained well after leaving the small shack on Svinøya.

Gómez-Egaña revisited this theme in a subsequent commissioned piece for Colomboscope in Sri Lanka, for which he created *Vimana Kiranaavarta Observatory* (2015).<sup>3</sup>

The first word of the title referred to the *Vaimānika Śāstra*, a Sanskrit text written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Maharshi Bharadwaaja, in which he claimed to reveal the engineering behind the mythical flying machines *vimānas* in ancient epic poems from the Indian subcontinent. The sound installation was situated on the top floor of the former RIO Hotel, which was built in 1979, but burnt during the Sri Lankan Civil War, known as Black July in 1983. Once visitors reached Gómez-Egaña's work, they were invited to sit on chairs facing different directions with views across the surrounding landscape. Through headphones, they could listen to a soundtrack, narrated by the artist, which interwove Poe's maelstrom poem with a range of historical, botanical and geographical information about this neighbourhood of Colombo.

*The Moon Will Teach You* was a site-specific installation at the historic House of the Great Salmon in Mechelen in Belgium, commissioned for the eighth Contour Biennial in 2017. From March to May, Gómez-Egaña's installation in the attic of this 16<sup>th</sup> century building, in a city which was the former capital of the Low Countries, brought to life the historical, mechanical way of printing via a system of ropes and weights, which had the added effect of shifting the light in the space and gradually immersing the viewer in darkness. The entire creaking process was set to music, inspired by the composer and copyist Pierre Alamire (1470–1536).<sup>4</sup> A similar mechanical approach to installation characterised Gómez-Egaña's next commission for the Istanbul Biennial (2017).<sup>5</sup> *Domain of Things* a domestic interior on a structure of tracks and wheels, moved around by four dark-clad performers. The effect oscillated between the moments of calm when all the pieces aligned and created a cosy, darkened dwelling, and the discombobulating sensation of the home being gradually torn apart. Evoking Mechelen, the work creaked, creating an undertone to the musical composition that accompanied the piece.

This characteristic form of storytelling was further developed in Gómez-Egaña's most recent project, *Sleipnir* (2018), for YARAT Contemporary Art Space in Baku, Azerbaijan. In this ten-minute sound installation, eight visitors were ushered into a darkened space, echoing the eight legs of the Sleipnir horse from Norse mythology. With the help of levers, eight performers outside moved the wooden contraption around them, which gradually shifted the light inside. The narrated text was composed from excerpts from Jorge Luis Borges's short story *The Aleph* (1945) about a specific point in space through which everything in the universe can be seen simultaneously, together with Thor Heyerdahl's theory that Scandinavian people originated from what is now Azerbaijan, and Norse mythology

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<sup>3</sup> Colomboscope (2015) was entitled *Shadow Scenes*, and was curated by Natasha Ginwala and Menika van del Poorten.

<sup>4</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Contour Biennale (2017) was entitled *Polyphonic Worlds: Justice as Medium*, and was curated by Natasha Ginwala.

<sup>5</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2017) was entitled *A Good Neighbour*, and was curated by Ingar Dragset and Michael Elmgreen.

interwoven with elements of the artist's own biography. The soundtrack was composed with elements from Norwegian and Azerbaijani folk music.

Gómez-Egaña's use of literature and history to create a form of storytelling which is at once locally anchored and more widely resonant by invoking myths or tropes that figure across most cultures is becoming a salient feature of his installation works. These are often supported by mechanical elements which determine the light and consequently visual access to a space, frequently in tandem with a live performer, who carries out simple tasks that insert the human body – with its variability and fallibility – into the mechanics of the piece. The penchant for using musical compositions as a performative element in his installations can be traced back to Gómez-Egaña's training as a composer. In his commissioned work for *Munchmuseet on the Move* these elements conjoin to create what might be deemed a total installation, albeit one that retains Gómez-Egaña's unique ability to create intimate spaces in which the story can unfold.

At the Oslo Opera House, visitors are ushered upstairs from the foyer, around the curving balcony and into a space known variously the VIP room, Queen Sonja's Royal Box, or Brunvoll, after the opera and ballet impresario, known as the father of the Norwegian Opera. Inside this space of representation, Gómez-Egaña has built another, domestic room. It is an intimate, yet strangely generic interior. It could be a hotel room or one of the many apartments in Bjørvika let to temporary staff for different companies based in the area, on secondment from the London or Dubai office. The room is enveloped by two soundtracks: one that narrates the story and a more abstract one that occupies the interstitial space between the room and the room-within-a-room, evoking Bjørvika's industrial past while linking to the Opera as a house of music. The character in *The Voice of Jacob at Dawn* is fictionalized, but points to a living person, Jacob Jarmann, who co-founded Nylands Verksted, a workshop that lay at the mouth of the Aker River from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As Norway's trading fleet expanded, and steam and steel revolutionised manufacturing, Nylands Verksted became the country's largest shipyard, building over 100 whaling boats and 50 passenger ships, as well as railway engines and other industrial machinery. At the height of its activity in 1900, the yard employed over a 1000 people. As the demand for larger ships became the norm across the industry, Nyland Verksted was too small to compete, and by the early 1970s the entire area had been vacated and seemed like a ghost town.<sup>6</sup> Not until the Opera opened in 2008 did the area see the kind of human activity of 100 years past. With the opening of the new Munch Museum, on the opposing bank of the Aker River, the area's transformation will be complete.

Through a series of succinct poetic chapters, Gómez-Egaña tells the story of a character who resides in this room. As noted above, Jacob appears to suffer from sleep paralysis, a condition that can set in just before one awakes, where one's mind appears alert but the body cannot move. His daily rhythm is punctuated by the regular thudding pattern of manufacturing, as the steam from the railways and the ships mixes with the Oslo Fog, which rolls in from the fjord and envelops the bay of Bjørvika. Time seems to accelerate as the dawn turns to day and to dusk with each chapter. The light fades, darkness comes, and then dawn breaks again. The atmosphere is a strange one; like the character in the story, the

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<sup>6</sup> Dag Andreassen, Norsk Teknisk Museum, quoted in the article *Nylands Verksted* online: <http://industrimuseum.no/bedrifter/nylandsverksted>.

visitor may notice an uncanny presence in the half-light as objects in the interior seem to move in tune with the occupant's racing mind, half-asleep but hyper-alert.

After ten minutes, visitors exit the building into the blinding light reflected by the white marble exterior of the Opera house. In these moments of half-seeing, perhaps they will still hear the echo of the *Voice of Jacob at Dawn*, a nod to the past amid the architectural futurity of Bjørvika.

**Natalie Hope O'Donnell**