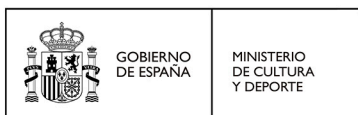
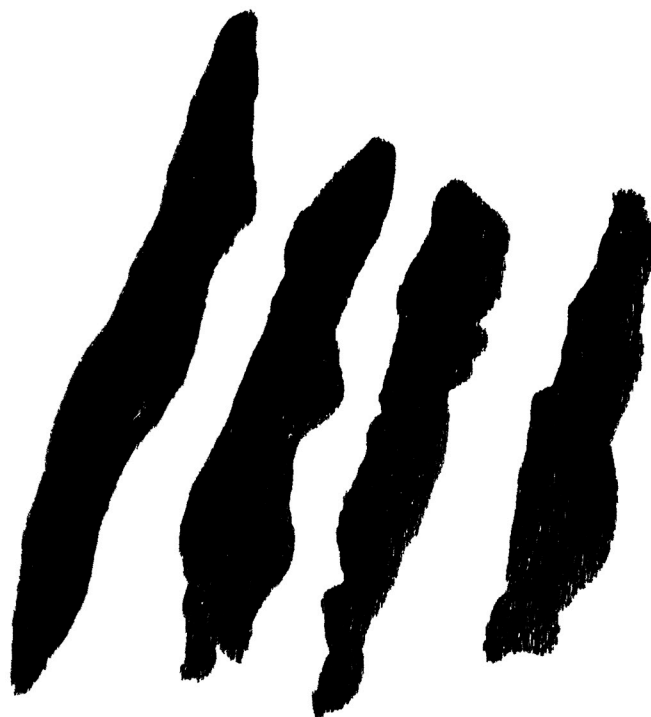


THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Miguel Ángel García

English texts



If a person is taken away from their place and family of origin, taken elsewhere, turned into merchandise to end up as labor force, their name is changed, they are assigned an owner... If they resist, they know that their children will be the property of their owner and that they will probably be sold to others who exercise the same extreme form of domination and power of one human being over another, they will be enslaved persons. Over them, force will become a right and obedience will be their duty.

It is hard to believe that slavery has existed since the dawn of humanity, since the very birth of the first human groups. And even more, that it has been and still is produced in almost all of them as a constituent part of their development. In the current framework of our western society, having created the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by which we should govern our societies, we live with a slavery that is not hidden at all, while we openly condemn and reproach it. How can this be?

Miguel Ángel García, with courageous determination, brings us closer to this reality through *The Great Experiment*, a term that literally reproduces the one used in the island of Mauritius, colonial domain of Great Britain in 1834, as a trial to end slavery.

It is an artistic project that critically analyzes it by tracing the life story of the so-called *coolies* -who mainly came from India-, people transported by sea to the island of Mauritius to do unpaid forced labor in the cultivation of sugar cane for several years in exchange for obtaining the status of a free person. The journey, the work, their homes and, in short, the environment in which they lived their lives, are the core of García's interest in bringing to our consciences the certainty that one of the debts we human beings are born with is to recognize enslaved people as full persons, something they could not and cannot be during their lives.

This exhibition is a tribute to those who never existed socially, a tribute to those who do not exist now, and the expression of the desire that such a powerful tool as art is capable of making us understand how we are. *Todos los textos de esta exposición son de su comisaria, Isabel Durán.*

All the texts in this exhibition are by its curator, Isabel Durán.

THE JOURNEY THAT PRODUCES THE SWEET TASTE

In the Middle Ages, sugar was a luxury item in Europe. It was brought from the East and was rarely used because of its high price. When Europe began to trade with America, everything changed. The new sugar cane plantations produced enormous quantities of this wonderful sweetener and its price dropped.

In Great Britain, for example, people went from taking practically no sugar at all in the 16th century to an average annual intake of eight kilograms per person in the 19th century. None of this would have happened if the labor force that worked on the sugar cane plantations had been paid. The sugar industry became at that time in places like Mauritius the most important source of income. Sweetening the palate is still big international business, now worth \$70 billion annually. At the end of the 20th century, each European consumed around 30 kilograms a year.

Sugar cultivation requires great physical effort, in fact, it is considered one of the hardest jobs in existence. It has been and is linked to slavery throughout the world. Estremece mirar el mar hoy pensando en que es una imagen similar a la que veían las personas esclavizadas en los largos traslados que les llevaron lejos de su lugar de nacimiento. No hay palabras para describir lo que suponían los viajes en los barcos negreros. "Me maravillo de que alguno haya llegado con vida", afirmaba un médico responsable de revisar el estado en el que llegaban a finales del siglo XVIII al puerto de Charleston (Carolina del Sur). Y sigue: "Solo un testigo ocular puede hacerse una idea de los horrores que estas pobres criaturas deben soportar en la travesía del océano".

It is shocking to look at the sea today and think that it's a similar image to the one that enslaved people saw on the long voyages that took them far from their place of birth. There are no words to describe what the voyages on the slave ships entailed. "I marvel that any of them have arrived alive," said a doctor responsible for checking the condition in which they arrived at the end of the 18th century in the port of Charleston (South Carolina). And he continues: "Only an eyewitness can get an idea of the horrors these poor creatures must endure on the ocean crossing."

"When economic growth becomes a supreme good, unconstrained by any other ethical consideration, it can easily lead to catastrophe" asserts Y. N. Harari in *Sapiens*. In four centuries, within the framework of the colonial economy, some fifteen million people were enslaved. It was the beginning of what we could call an industrialized and transnational form of slavery.

Slavery today, in various forms, continues to support other sources of economic growth. The annual business amounts to \$150 billion. It has under its mantle more than forty million enslaved people in the world.

G20 countries are importing more than \$354 billion worth of goods annually that are at serious risk of being produced under a modern slavery regime. Buying products that guarantee that they have not been produced under forced labor conditions is the first step to end this situation and ensure compliance with human rights.

MUCH MORE THAN LANDSCAPES

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) German Romantic poet, playwright and novelist, wrote in 1810 about *The Monk by the Sea*, a seascape painted in oil by Caspar David Friedrich in 1809: "If this landscape were painted with its own sand and its own water, I think one could make foxes and wolves howl with it".

If contemplating the beautiful landscapes that Miguel Ángel García brings us, both of architectures and of pure nature, we were able to hear and touch the echoes and remains of another not so distant era, not only wolves and foxes would howl. It is not difficult to be able to attribute feelings to trees and buildings, to personify them in some way. To look at them as witnesses of horror and ignominy.

These large trees sheltered for decades the slave auctions on the island of Mauritius, which, to facilitate counting, translated into one nail per person sold. And these houses were inhabited by victims and executioners in a sort of shameful coexistence. The intertwining of shapes and colors tells us with intense simplicity how they shared life, even though they were socially dead.

A coexistence that is still present today. A shame for those of us who, although we are supposed to have advanced a lot in rights, know and allow situations of trafficking and other forms of modern slavery. Bob Dylan's splendid song still plays: " Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head, pretending he just doesn't see? ". The answer is still blowin' in the wind. Hopefully we can catch it and make it disappear once and for all.

STRANGE FRUIT

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop

Here is a strange and bitter crop

Lewis Allan/Billie Holiday (1939)

Dear white brother,

When I was born, I was black,
When I grew up, I was black,
When I am in the sun, I am black,
When I am sick, I am black,
When I die, I will be black.

While you, white man,
When you were born, you were pink,
When you grew up, you were white,
When you go in the sun, you are red,
When you are cold, you are blue,
When you are scared, you are green,
When you are sick, you are yellow,
When you die, you will be grey.

So, between you and me,
Who is the colored man?

Léopold Sédar Senghor (1975)

THE LAST FRONTIER

Slavery has always existed. And despite the anachronisms that occur when studying the different cultures and periods of history and the resounding confirmation that all human societies have developed forms of slavery, in a current analysis, we cannot fail to affirm that it has always been and is criminal.

Its industrial development, in mass proportions, took place at the dawn of capitalism, reaching previously unknown numbers: millions of people were forcibly displaced from Africa to America and enslaved until the 19th century. The rest is nothing more than a story of exponential growth that highlights the low expectations we have of our species when we see that slavery is still an essential part of our era and that capitalism has adopted it in various forms to ensure that economic growth continues apace. Meanwhile, we continue "pretending we just don't see". Uno de los grandes estigmas de la esclavitud es el racismo. A pesar de los esfuerzos de determinadas ideologías por defender la supremacía de unos determinados grupos humanos sobre otros, la ciencia demuestra que solo hay una especie humana en el planeta: la *Homo Sapiens*.

One of the great stigmas of slavery is racism. Despite the efforts of certain ideologies to defend the supremacy of certain human groups over others, science shows that there is only one human species on the planet: the *Homo Sapiens*.

On the other hand, racism continues to grow. We have not had enough with the Holocaust, Apartheid, racism in the United States, the massacre of peoples and ethnicities in South America... " Southern trees bear strange fruit (...) Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze..." , sang Billie Holiday in 1939 seeing what was being done to people of African descent in the South of her country.

Skin color or belonging to a certain ethnic group continues to be a major barrier to the development of people with equal opportunities. To paraphrase Léopold Sédar Senghor: who has no color?

The tragedy of *The Great Experiment* has mutated into many different forms in our world today. Let's not stop thinking about it!