



Caspar David Friedrich, *Mountain Landscape with Rainbow*, 70 x 102 cm, 1809-1810 (oil on canvas).

Christian Gómez\*

## At Night, the Scale of Human Existence

A disquieting news item was published in early September this year about the collision of two black holes. According to media reports, the violent encounter gave rise to a new black hole 142 times the mass of our Sun. The resulting gravitational wave of the event seven billion years ago was detected by a signal that lasted barely one-tenth of a second. According to the report, this was the most violent explosion since the Big Bang. If black holes have their origins in the death of massive stars, what was disconcerting about this event was that that size range of these masses had never been seen before, and scientists do not understand how they were formed.

The way I have related this scientific news probably includes some errors, misunderstandings, or certain media sensationalism. But, in the process of writing this article, this data about the scale of our existence changed my focus. Writing about the night could no longer be done merely in opposition to the day, but within the

context of a broader understanding. As science and the sky show us, it is in the absence of solar light, the awareness of *what-is-outside*, that the scale of human existence is revealed to us.

Analogously, in art, we have exhibitions, registries, and news that turn our eyes again toward our own scale. Even the artworks produced many years ago activate small, potent collisions between ourselves and others. They affect us with their strength and force us to put into perspective our notions of time, origins, and our own scope: to recognize our inability to represent the world's phenomena and to inhabit our universes differently. Like in astronomy, in art it is precisely at night when we can *see more*.

### News from Another Time

The night has been a constant topic and stage in the history of art. It is the place of the sleepless, caring for the ill, nostalgia, the clandestine, passion and desire, parties and dancing, anguish, terror,

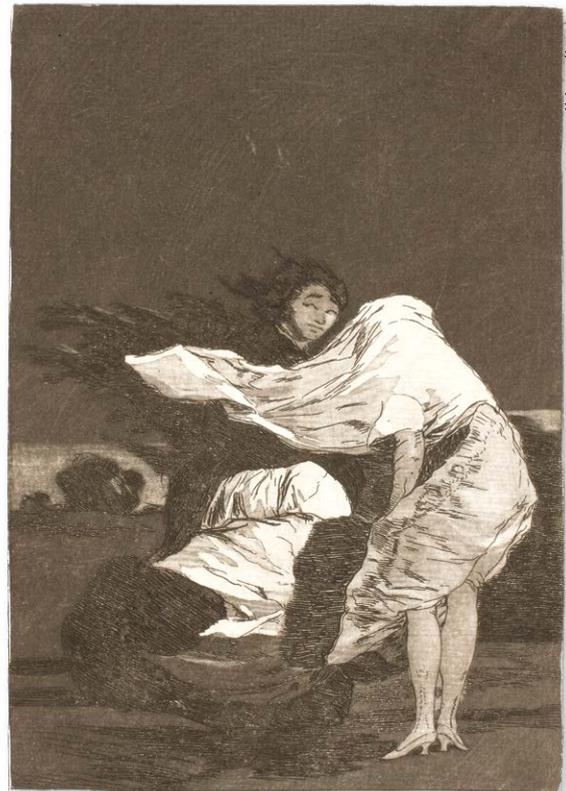
\* Journalist and cultural critic; christiangomez01@hotmail.com.

Like in astronomy, in art it is precisely  
at night when we can see more.

and the terrors. It is a space of dreams, daydreams, and wakefulness; its time seems malleable and ungraspable to us. In a year like 2020, when the cycles of waking life and sleep have been altered, the night has taken on prominence in the ways of experiencing the different crises springing from the COVID-19 pandemic. From there, we can point to certain works about the night as someone who looks at a starry sky and knows that there are different times there.

That is where *The Moon* (1928) appears, a work by Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral, which recently has become appreciated again because the New York Museum of Modern Art paid US\$20 million for it in 2019. Painted in the same year as her emblematic *The Man Who Eats People* (1928), an image that accompanies the *Anthropophagite Manifesto*, it features in the foreground a cactus that looks more like a person with his/her back turned, in front of a horizon of solid colors: a body in front of a landscape bathed in the light of a waning moon.

That seductive work of modern Brazilian art leads our gaze to romantic painting, motivated by the emancipation of artists vis-à-vis the aristocracy and the church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. Amidst the hard-won freedom to pick their topics, nature and its power in the face of human beings' smallness took on a prominent role. They conquered the freedom to look at the sky. *Mountain Landscape with Rainbow* (1809-1810), by German painter Caspar David Friedrich, shows us a walker resting to look at a light that would be impossible in the face of such



Francisco de Goya, *Bad Night*, 31.5 x 22.3 cm, 1799 (etching and burnished aquatint), from the "Caprichos" series.

a black landscape. The incommensurability of nature and the reminder of the human scale play a leading role in others of his works like *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819) and *Moonrise Over the Sea* (1822).

Very nearby, the light of all the moons is reflected in the work of Rufino Tamayo. In his painting, the negotiation of the problem of a national/universal identity permeated by dialogue with the pictorial avant-gardes of his time, we encounter *Dog Barking at the Moon* (1942) and *Moon Dog* (1973). Man before the Earth's natural satellite would be a theme of his work, which in its breadth situates us as the central figure of *Man Before the Infinite* (1950).

At a point that feels closer shine the works of Remedios Varo, an artist of the surrealist diaspora who found in daydreams a way of facing up to the horrors of her day. She reminds us, for example in her *Disturbing Presence* (1959) that we are not alone, as well as the power of the women she portrays in different towers, like the one feeding the captive moon in *Celestial Pabulum* (1958).

Looking from one side to the other, we stop to think about nocturnes as a genre of poetry, music, and painting. Just to mention it, we could recreate with our eyes closed the lights of the modern, electrified city in Camille Pissarro's *Montmartre Boulevard, Night Effect* (1897) or the gestures of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942). It would be interesting to know if Vincent van Gogh's famous *Starry Night* (1889) came before his *Starry Night over the*



Caspar David Friedrich, *Moonrise Over the Sea*, 55 x 71 cm, 1822 (oil on canvas).



▲ Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 2.68 x 3.47 m, 1814 (oil on canvas).

*Rhône* (1988). The night is also inhabited by multiple images by Francisco de Goya, such as his “Caprichos,” where, from the gaze of the patient, he painted the expression of a *Bad Night* (1797-1799).

If we lower our eyes from that universe to what is around us, we find ourselves in a play of light that reveals or hides multitudinous dimensions of the human. It is nighttime in the installation *Trial-1929* (1979), which the Grupo Proceso Pentágono presented to barely suggest to the visitor what it would be like to have his/her body in the labyrinth of police repression and torture in Mexico.

As Woody Allen’s film *Midnight in Paris* (2011) suggests, it is in the night that life’s excesses touch on artistic motifs, that artists find each other and exchange in spaces that surpass the academic and the intellectual to cross over into emotions. This is confirmed from another perspective in *Paris Is Burning* (1990),

daytime, are overrun. A night that foreshadowed the eruption of the youth in the years that were to follow.

In *We Turn in the Night, Consumed by Fire* (1978), Guy Debord’s last film, the writer uses a nocturnal image to once again denounce the alienation that consumer society sinks us in. At the same time, in *Paradox of Praxis 5* (2015), artist Francis Aljys walks the streets of Ciudad Juárez kicking a burning ball; in the darkness, the fire lights scenes of the social and economic crisis.

We could continue to identify the flashes that make different realities visible, but we’ll settle on a recent story in which the night plays a central role as the scene for many discoveries. In the film *This Is Not Berlin* (2019), directed by Hari Sama, two adolescents rediscover the limits of the city; they encounter their desire and the possibilities of the collective body. As the background party that

If we lower our eyes from that universe to what is around us, we find ourselves in a play of light that reveals or hides multitudinous dimensions of the human.



▲ Christian Camacho, *Composition for the Night*, 2019 (enamel, foamboard, balsa wood, oil paint, thread, nails, glass, and foil). Photo courtesy of the Arróniz Contemporary Art Gallery.

At night, we also talk to the dead,  
without distinction, just as Juan Rulfo has  
told us. We give ourselves opportunities  
as well of transgressing against  
what has been imposed.

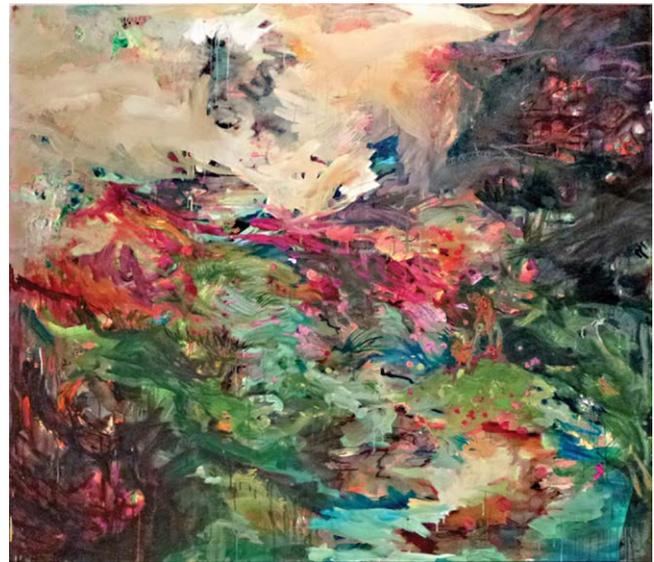
brings them together, the story proposes a portrayal—or perhaps just a glimpse—of the emotional, festive dimension of the rise of the contemporary artistic scene in Mexico City in the 1980s. At a distance, this radiance reminds us of the pleasure of sharing the night with others and the hope of once again dancing at night.

### Fade to Black

It is in the darkness of the night that we think of light: from the stars to the candles, from the countryside to the modern city. Like exploring an eternal night, light has been an unavoidable problem of art; in painting, for example, the problems of chiaroscuro, landscape painting, impressionism. In that sense, for decades and decades, the French painter Pierre Soulages has insisted on asking questions about light in the black. Given the timeliness of these questions—and before concluding—, I will look now for a moment at the work of two contemporary Mexican painters.

In a series of unpublished texts titled *Soles negros que llamo pinturas* (Black Suns that I Call Paintings), dedicated to painters she dialogues with, Lucía Vidales (Mexico City, 1986) proposes different approaches to black: that of the night, of gunpowder, and of ink. In the text about the night, centered on the work of Christian Camacho (Mexico City, 1985), she asks herself, “The imagination is neither entered nor left. If the imagination has neither beginning nor end, where does the nocturnal light come from for the imagination? Or, I should ask, what is its time and not its place? What connects it? What lightens or darkens it? In this way, the nocturnal sun does not enter and leave: it appears.”

In her exposition “Night during the Day” (Gallery of Mexican Art, 2019), Lucía Vidales’s paintings and sculptures are presented in a dialogue with the works of Leonora Carrington, Pita Amor, Cordelia Urueta, Joy Laville, Olga Costa, and María Izquierdo. Beyond the notion of prestige, the images cross over and reverberate against each other based on the colors and the tensions in the life and death that inhabit them. From the nocturnal light that feeds the imagination, a tangible problem in her own work, Vidales made visible fragments, extremities, and organs of beings of



▲ Lucía Vidales, *Gravediggers*, 140 x 170 cm, 2016 (oil on canvas).  
Photo courtesy of author.

today and of other times; tensions of the living and the dead that, through the emphasis of the materials in her paintings, are more a presence than a representation.

Christian Camacho’s 2018 text “Introducción al astro multiple: pintura, imaginación y gravitación” (Introduction to the Multiple Star: Painting, Imagination, and Gravitation) was written for artist Marco Treviño’s project “A Multiple Expression. A Publication, a Mounted Exposition, A Pictorial Meeting.” Like in all his work, here Camacho elaborates on the implications of a phrase by the U.S. American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne: “Moonlight is sculpture; sunlight is painting.” Starting from there, he speculates about the implications of many artistic problems based on a gravitational relationship resulting from the direct or indirect rays of the sun. As a result, in his exhibition “Sleep and the Underworld” (Arróniz Contemporary Art Gallery, 2019), Camacho brings to wakefulness, as he himself has said, the recovery of his own dreams in works that are a constant tension—a gravitation—between the conditions of sculpture and painting.

What was to have been a glance at recent artistic productions emerging from thinking about the night appears more clearly as a collision of gazes; just like the news about the stars, these pieces return to us other visions of the world. In them, like in the rest of the works glimpsed in this essay, is a confirmation that nocturnal approximations always return us to the problems of light and the possibilities of seeing. If, like in astronomy, in art it is precisely at night when we can *see* more, we must thank both disciplines for the constant reminders of the human scale, since it is only in that dimension where the night comforts us with the promise of tomorrow. ■■■