

HYPERALLERGIC

A Haunting Installation Reexamines the Ideals of Spanish Modernist Architecture

Rather than celebrating the Francoist Hexagon Pavilion, Alvaro Urbano asks whether the lingering ghosts of the dictatorship are simply decaying or actively festering.

by Hannah Feniak (November 6, 2020)



Installation view of Alvaro Urbano: *The Awakening* (© Trevor Lloyd; all images courtesy Casa Encendida)

MADRID — In his installation at the Casa Encendida, Alvaro Urbano asks: how can we deconstruct the remnants of a monument, even after its physical traces disintegrate?

In the single room space of *The Awakening*, clusters of metallic, hexagonal parasols serve as backdrop for a lively theatre of decay. Evoking Spain's iconic pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958 — later reconstructed in Madrid's sprawling Casa del Campo park — the prefabricated elements contrast with otherwise organic motifs. Shrivelling leaves fall from the branches of small trees, while a limp racoon costume appears like a carcass, strewn amongst extinguished cigarette butts and molding oranges. The space is segmented by portions of chicken-wire fence and bathed in an atmosphere of fog and lurid yellow light that fluctuates amid a reverberating soundscape of intense, dissonant noise.



Alvaro Urbano, *The Awakening* (© Trevor Lloyd)

Designed by José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún, the original Hexagon Pavilion was celebrated for its ingenious use of prefabrication technology and was seen to represent the country's "modern" spirit — a contention that glazed over the fact that its design was conceived within the political economy of the thirty-six-years-long dictatorship of Francisco Franco. Six decades later, Urbano builds on the motifs of the landmark Francoist structure, asking viewers to imagine architecture in all its guises, as a living entity with a past and a future.

Monuments exist not only in public space, but also in our collective memory, as the exhibition title, *El Despertar* (The Awakening), suggests. The haziness of smoke that fills the room makes it literally impossible to bring details of the installation into focus, evoking the conviction that monuments can rarely be seen fully for what they are.

Although the pavilion of 1958 seemed to represent transparency, openness and modernity, such ideals were far from the everyday realities of the dictatorship. From the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, the population faced food shortages and continued social repression, its industry lagged far behind that of neighbouring European countries. Yet, the building burns brightly in cultural imagination as a testament to social progress and modernization, even as the original structure has paradoxically fallen into a state of dereliction on the outskirts of the city.



Alvaro Urbano, *The Awakening* (© Trevor Lloyd)

Moving beyond the imaginaries of abandoned or obsolete architecture, as well as the notion that works of architecture should be preserved as pristine objects identical to the moment of their construction, Urbano presents the pavilion as a living organism, coexisting amid a multitude of lifecycles. Rather than celebrating its modernist design, Urbano suggests that, like the ghost of the dictatorship that continues to haunt Spanish society, the memories associated with the pavilion are still alive — whether they are simply decaying or festering is left to the visitor to decide.

Alvaro Urbano: *The Awakening* continues through January 10, 2021 at *La Casa Encendida* (Ronda de Valencia, 2, 28012 Madrid, Spain). The exhibition was curated by José Esparza Chong Cuy.