

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition by Rosana Simonassi  
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**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## Thoughts About The Pampas

By Florencio Noceti

*L'étendue des Pampas est si prodigieuse, qu'au nord elles sont bornées par des bosquets de palmier, et au midi par des neiges éternelles.*

*The range of the Pampas is so prodigious, that to the north they are bordered by thickets of palm trees, and to the south by eternal snows.*

- Francis Bond Head

*Afueras*, a visual art exhibition by Rosana Simonassi, consists of a series of black and white photographs taken in the Argentine and Uruguayan Pampas. Each image is cast on the walls of a dark room by a fixed slide projector. Rosana Simonassi was born in Buenos Aires in 1974. In that same city she graduated as a cinematographer and developed a career in filmmaking, photography, and teaching. Her mother, however, came from a family of farmers of Spanish descent, so the artist is now living and working where her ancestors lived, in the Pampas, which lie west of the city.

These Pampas are a physical feature unique to the southern end of the Americas. Charles Darwin was amongst the first (and greatest) of many European Naturalists that attempted to further our knowledge of

them. In an August 1833 entry of "The Voyage of the Beagle," he registered his first encounter with what he called that "extremely level country" thusly:

Turning northward from the river, we soon entered on a country, differing from the plains south of the river. The land still continued dry and sterile: but it supported many different kinds of plants, and the grass, though brown and withered, was more abundant, as the thorny bushes were less so. These latter in a short space entirely disappeared, and the plains were left without a thicket to cover their nakedness. This change in the vegetation marks the commencement of the grand calcareo-argillaceous deposit, which forms the wide extent of the Pampas.

Since that early rendering, scientists such as Darwin himself, Francis Bond Head, and Alexander von Humboldt have used such picturesque concepts as "calcareous-argillaceous deposit" in their efforts to define what was happening there at a geographical and geological level. Surprising phenomena, like the area's almost absolute lack of trees, have been attributed either to the force of the winds or to the kind of drainage present there. After all this exploration and study, the



Nieblas # 10, 2001



Yuyos # 19, 2003

nuances of the Pampas have been forcefully reduced to their handful of general laws, theories, and notions.

On the other hand, natives (whether Aboriginal or Creole) have always been wary of those definitions and explanations. They have thought about the Pampas, all right, but in ways that attempt to represent their vague, indefinite, and limitless nature. Thus, in local endeavours, the images and phantasms of poetry and visual arts have always taken the place of scientific concepts and accounts. An analysis from Argentinian writer and thinker Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (a contemporary of Charles Darwin) illustrates this point. In *Facundo*, he writes,

*La pampa ostenta su lisa y velluda frente,  
infinita, sin límite conocido,  
sin accidente notable;  
es la imagen del mar en la tierra,  
la tierra como en el mapa;  
la tierra aguardando todavía que se la mande  
producir las plantas y toda clase de simiente.*

*(The pampas show their even and hairy brow,  
endless, that knows no limit  
without a noteworthy accident  
they are the image of the sea in land,  
land as in a map;  
land still waiting to be commanded  
to produce plants and every kind of seed.)*

The pictures in Rosana Simonassi's *Afuera*s may be a legacy of that old native attempt to capture the Pampas. They do not say or deny anything, but they all hint at the elusiveness and infinity of the Pampas they portray. Each photograph in particular, and the series as a whole, make the blurring and hazing forces of those plains visible and even obvious. The whole toolbox used in their production seems adapted to that purpose. What the pictures frame, the techniques they have recourse to, and even the blurriness of their display -- all of these are connected with that return to indistinctness.

The framing of each image is significant not so much for what it fits in as for what it excludes. Almost every trace of the presence of the European man is left out. In the times of Darwin and Sarmiento, such traces were few and far between, but by the time Simonassi's pictures were made, the farming industry had taken over most of the wide extent of the Pampas. Those lands are no longer "waiting to be commanded to produce plants and every kind of seed"; rather, crops and artificial pastures cover most of the "dry and sterile" country, taking the place of the many different kinds of plants and the grass it once supported.

*Afuera*s, nevertheless, focuses in the few remaining tracks of wild vegetation on the Pampas. Interestingly, in Spanish these weeds are generally called *malezas*: *mal* means "evil." But natives of the Pampas have developed a name of their own: they call that ever-diminishing feral plant life *yuyos*. *Yuyos* are not evil, they are simply useless. They cannot be harvested, they cannot be fed to cattle. In her artist's statement for *Afuera*s, Simonassi claims that their "dynamic" is not "alienated," and she could be right: those natural *yuyos* grow free of any purpose or compromise. There's no reason why they are there, they just are. They embody the idea that Friedrich Nietzsche (responding to Darwin) articulated: "Nature has no goals."

The techniques applied in the production of the photographs involve black and white film, long expositions, and analogue craftsmanship. All these things add up to the imprecision and the mistiness they seek to express. Any clear and distinct representation of the Pampas would inevitably betray their nature. In fact it can even be said that the more defined and precise a depiction of those steppes gets, the more deceiving it becomes in portraying their essence and characteristics.

The final and, arguably, the most important aspect of *Afuera*s is the blurred effect of the images. Turned into borderless slides and faintly cast over naked walls,



Yuyos # 26, 2003



Nieblas # 31, 2001

with no confining screens or displays, the pictures end up being as bleary and unbounded as the landscapes they reveal. Quivering in the tremulous beams of the old analogue projectors, they appear to teeter like the yuyos they contain. They last as long as the light that shines through them, and when the gallery is closed and the power is turned down, the images simply vanish.

The photographs in *Afueras* echo the efforts of Pampas natives to bespeak the uncertainty of the landscape, but they also play a part in a smaller, yet still coherent, lineage. The previous and subsequent work in visual arts of *Afueras*'s author, Rosana Simonassi, is also concerned with the deconstruction of goals and final causes. Like yuyos and barren landscapes, most of her chosen subjects seem to serve no purpose whatsoever. Bringing them to light and drawing attention to their pointlessness could be ways of questioning everything that can only be understood as a mere means to an end.

For example, the black and white snapshots in *Hay lugares que recuerdo* depict time wasted in traveling and wandering. The short videos collected in *Bodas* portray casual interactions in wild nature. And Simonassi's latest production, *La serie de las mil muertes*, is comprised of grand format colour pictures on death and futile repetition. As it is shown, every theme constitutes an end in it self that cannot be justified as a step in any further direction. There is never an aim, nor an idea to explain and thus limit what happens.

The singular Pampas of the *Afueras* series can be deemed endless in those two rich senses: they know no limit and they serve no purpose. Their infinity is not

only quantitative, but also qualitative. No matter how far away we look, we can never see their ending. And even if we look closely, we shall never find a reason for them. Amusingly enough, the words now being used in the Pampas for holy ("sagrado") and worthless ("gratis") things, share the same etymological roots. The uselessness of what we see along the unvarying *Afueras* projections may, after all, be as significant as its vastness.

Alexander von Humboldt was a great German Naturalist; Charles Darwin followed in his footsteps. Needless to say, von Humboldt's accounts and rationalizations are of no consequence for us here. And still, one phrase written by him – in a rather unscientific note – may provide us with some solace amidst so much endlessness. We shall leave his encouraging statement to stand in the place of conclusions: "Like the oceans, the Pampas replenish the spirit with the feeling of infinity."

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Simonassi was born in 1974 and lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She graduated from the Universidad del Cine, Faculty of Cinematography in 1998. As a photographer and filmmaker she has exhibited her work internationally with recent exhibitions at: Plume Galerie, Paris; Diagonale, Centre des Arts et des Fibres du Québec, Montreal; National Hall of Visual Arts, and arteXarte Gallery, Buenos Aires.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

Florencio Francisco Noceti is a philosopher. Born in Buenos Aires in 1978, he is head professor of Epistemology for the Psychiatry career at the University of Buenos Aires. He is a member of the editorial committee of *Dialéctica* magazine on philosophy and social theory. He has published extensively on his area of expertise and, on occasion, in the field of visual arts critique.

**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

56 Ossington Avenue, Toronto ON M6J 2Y7  
T 416.645.1066 F 416.645.1681 E info@gallerytpw.ca  
Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm

