

Felix R Cid *The Sword of Damocles*

For the past several years the artist Felix R. Cid has photographed mass gatherings around the globe like an event photographer in delirium. The physical act of making the photographs is the starting point to his larger practice, which involves spending countless hours rummaging through his own materials to create a large-scale, densely contained singular image. Despite the layers of images he stitches together meticulously, Cid insists they are photographs as opposed to collages. From a distance they appear like abstract landscapes or clusters of human constellations. But upon approaching the image one sees with perfect clarity the micro scenes of a multitude of figures and dramas unfolding. Cid's subject therefore is at once a macro view of a globalized culture coming to a boil, and simultaneously a kind of portrait of ten thousand human souls standing to be counted and yearning for contact out in the world.

The inception of this work began with *Black Photographs* and was born out of a trinity of events: the ritualized blood sport of bullfighting in Cid's native Spain, a foam dance party in Ibiza, and a political protest in Madrid. Cid then spent the next few years traveling across the U.S., Europe and Australia to macro electronic music festivals, where he was drawn to the gesture of young people who "communicate in platforms that are not physical at all...and then there is this moment of almost rage, of expression and gathering together and shredding." His series *X* gave form to the pent-up desire of a generation who but for a brief moment abandon the passivity of their devices and online identities and find each other in a tantrum of song and dance and sweat. While Don DeLillo's prediction in *Mao II* that "The future belongs to crowds" became a proxy note to Andreas Gursky's work at the turn of the century, his more specific description aptly imagines Cid's process here in the twenty-tens: "It knocks him back in awe, the loss of scale and intimacy, the way love and sex are multiplied out, the numbers and shaped crowd. This really scares him, a mass of people turned into a sculptured object." Cid transforms the event and his own images into a sculptured object, one that further pushes boundaries of fiction and reality, metamorphosing the notion of the document, spectacle and photography itself.

In his latest body of work *The Sword of Damocles* ('fame of the people') the evolution of Felix R. Cid's work moved him to a revitalized political arena. The 2016 U.S. presidential election, the rise of right-wing nationalist movements across the West, and a hyper-partisan populace has inspired unprecedented numbers of people to take to the streets of capital cities, airports, and public squares in the U.S. and abroad. In *Immigration Ban, 2017* we see a crowd swarming with signs, unable to be controlled by the line of police officers overwhelmed at the bottom of the frame. This is one instance where the metaphor of *The Sword of Damocles*, an allusion to the imminent and ever-present peril faced by those in power, comes to life.

While the unmistakable sea of pink in *Women's March 2017* functions as a commemorative summation of what was likely the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history, it's tempting to overlook the fact that the image itself is a dreamscape of the artist's imagination. Juxtaposed by *Trump Inauguration 2017*, wherein a stark concrete

wall encroaches the top third of the picture, as if being built by the crowd below it, one can sense the anxiety of the artist, an immigrant himself, immersed in an audience moved by an undercurrent of xenophobic rhetoric from the new president. In fact, I can't help but remember one of my earliest encounters with Felix was his genuine bafflement with being officially identified as an *alien* by the U.S government. *Alien* became a term he decided to embrace and re-contextualize as an empowering weapon for his art. While the vantage point of the images seem to be that of an alien view, the viewer is likewise made to feel alien while recognizing a scene that is at once familiar yet utterly impossible. To see something we think we know but could not have imagined is the paradox of photography, and Cid has been grappling with this in a radical way. Perhaps the images evoke what French polymath Gustave Le Bon meant in 1895 when he wrote that "the memorable events in history are the visible effects of the invisible changes of human thought" (from *The Crowd: The Study of the Popular Mind*).

In addition to these prolific images, Cid has installed Greco-Roman style concrete cast sculptures piled on the gallery floor. Molded onto these representations of classical statuary are Mexican wrestling masks, a deliberately tongue-in-cheek response to Cid's experience as an immigrant in the U.S. where he is frequently called "a Mexican" despite being Spanish. The color and material of these objects relate to the gray wall of his *Trump Inauguration 2017* photograph. But beyond that one can't help but feel that Cid is the wrestler here, *The Alien*, as it were, jumping head first into the arena packed to capacity. A gesture of perseverance and resistance in a moment defined by the crisis of crises.

-Peter Baker

October 2017