



SCULPTING THE DARK

Ayisha Abraham

I was thinking of darkness – of night, of that night without light – the scourge of our modern world, our urban existence, in which darkness symbolizes fear, embodies ignorance and primitivism; a colonial construct for which we must strive in the march of progress toward light and illumination. But what do we see when we shut our eyes, when we sleep and relive our conscious lives, when the power goes off and we are without UPS? Or when we are in a dark forest enveloped by the night sky without the haze of city lights?

In darkness we try to have our eyes adapt. When we first enter a dark room from the light of day we see nothing. Our eyes adjust and gradually “forms” emerge –silhouettes, blocks of light and dark hues – and then our bodies find a path to negotiate space without stumbling. In the *Nocturne* series, Lata Mani and Nicolás Grandi catch those points of light, mere lines and dots in the landscape and the sounds of life that inhabit it, sounds to which we turn deaf ears or which are smothered by the roar of traffic and elude us as though playing hide and seek.

In *Nocturne I*, the life forms of nature, the lines of thick and clear grass, fall against the light. The circular torch-like light falls onto the dark screen bringing up that which is invisible, blanketed by the sunless night. A plant glows in all its green – the city represented by lit-up buildings, dots and points on a horizon. The camera helps you focus as it moves.

In *Nocturne II*, dusk descends and light must come from within. The objects themselves must radiate light, carve out niches in the dark. It is as if we are cutting into a black sheet of paper to reveal patterns – circles, a fire, the electrical cold of a tube light. The warmth of the fire becomes conversation in a social milieu. The sounds of nature recede to filter in the tones of classical music. Dispersed light forms circles of smudged yellow.



By the end both darkness and the light have been possessed, made peace with, carved into like primitive sculpture, chiseled to imbue the chi and spirit of our soul: our inner selves. The seeking of knowledge of the dark in *Nocturne I* ceases. The darkness is now one with those who represent it. Technology is exchanged and becomes a tool to carve and craft. The bright moon in its golden form, the final image of *Nocturne II*, is of the darkness itself: a darkness that is illuminated to its most radiant.

For Nicolás, the mere task of shooting in the night was a challenge. How do you shoot in the dark with a tool – the camera – that needs light to represent the object of its gaze? For Lata, as she lies in bed listening to urban nature, the calls of frogs, crickets, and night birds, the city is reimaged. Urban nature reveals itself in its sounds only at a time when sleep slows down the pace of life. And what we pay no attention to emerges, alerts us to its presence, breaking down the boundary so unnaturally constructed between the exterior and the interior.

For both Nicolás and Lata, it is the ears that become a recorder of night music, the body an ethno-musicologist listening intently. From this layering of sound and carving of image comes text. A poem is crafted not simply with ink on paper. Rather, in a collaborative meeting point, writer and filmmaker, play with text that hesitantly, and in a staccato fashion inscribes the surface of the video, even as image and sound resist any thrust to over-theorize. Absence, emptiness and darkness begin to assert themselves, unabashedly combining different ways of seeing, hearing and reading, leaving one with a sense of calm, the feeling that *Nocturne I & II* can just exist, as is, without too much explanation.

