

STUDIO VISIT: ANA BIDART

Tracing time

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By Ellen Mara De Wachter



Ana Bidart, Untitled (sun drawing series), 2017. Photo: Silverio Orduña

A studio visit with Ana Bidart is a wide-ranging and playful thing: one moment we contemplate the relationship of structure to freedom, and the correlation between rules and games; the next we consider the shapes tears make when they fall on a letter and the importance of doodling; and at several points we find ourselves tackling the concept of time itself. In artworks that give visual expression to transient phenomena, such as the passage of light across walls and floors; or to the invisible forces governing our planet, including gravity as it pulls ink and dust onto canvas, Ana hints at both the wonders of our universe and the limitations we humans must place on our encounters with it, in order to make any sense at all of what we experience.



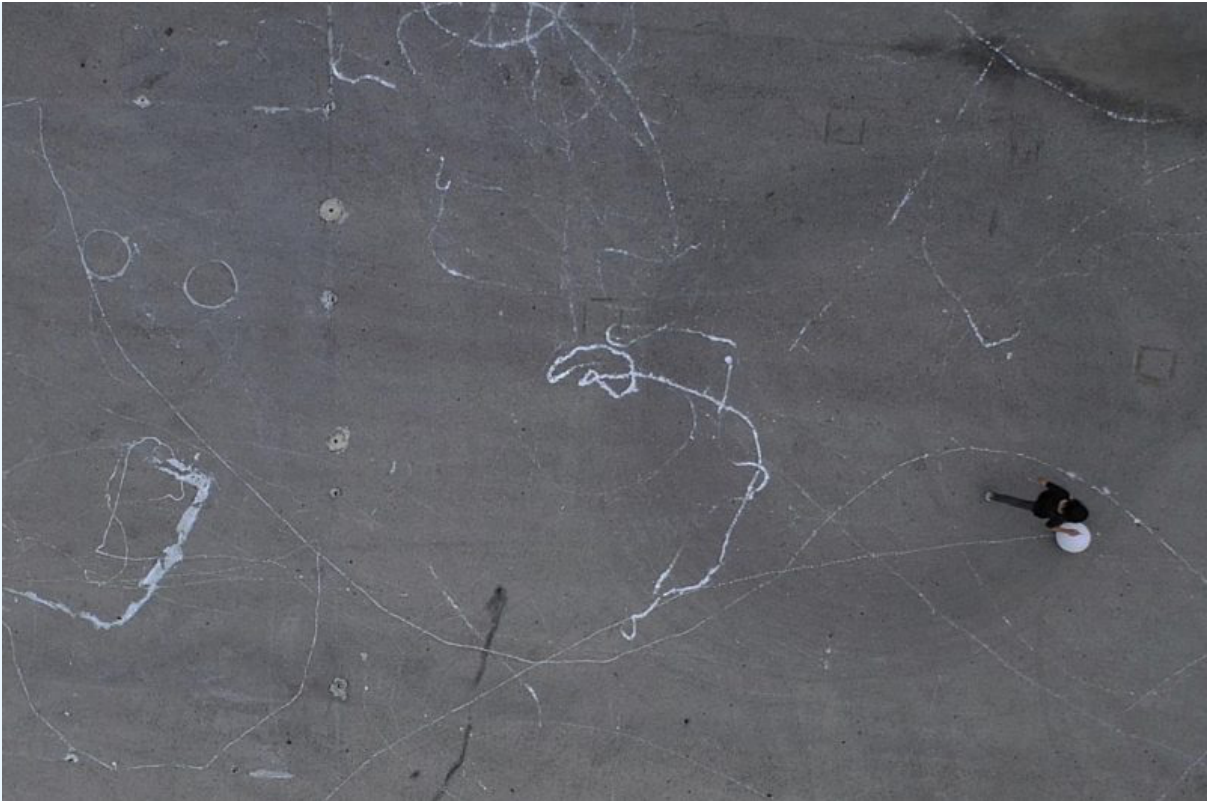
Ana Bidart, *Untitled (sun drawing series)*, 2017. Site-specific drawing. Acrylic paint marker on concrete. Photo Silverio Orduña

The question of time is something Ana recognises as “our human struggle”, given that time progresses regardless of our attempts to frame, harness, and manage it. A work such as *Untitled (sun drawing series)*, 2017, for which Ana observed the movement of sunlight through the windows and across the floor of a space, tracing its edge with a chalk pen at regular intervals to produce a series of lines, engages with both the undeniable reality that things change, and the constructed and therefore limited nature of our conception of time. Drawing takes centre stage in Ana’s playful, process-based practice. In this case, the action involved the space, time, light, as well as the artist’s body to produce a drawing that, as Ana recounts, allowed the sun the following day to “read its own score,” notated across the floor. This piece arose from Ana’s desire to measure time in a more sensory way than that permitted by the abstract tools of hours and clocks, and to recognise that time gains meaning only through our lived, embodied experience.



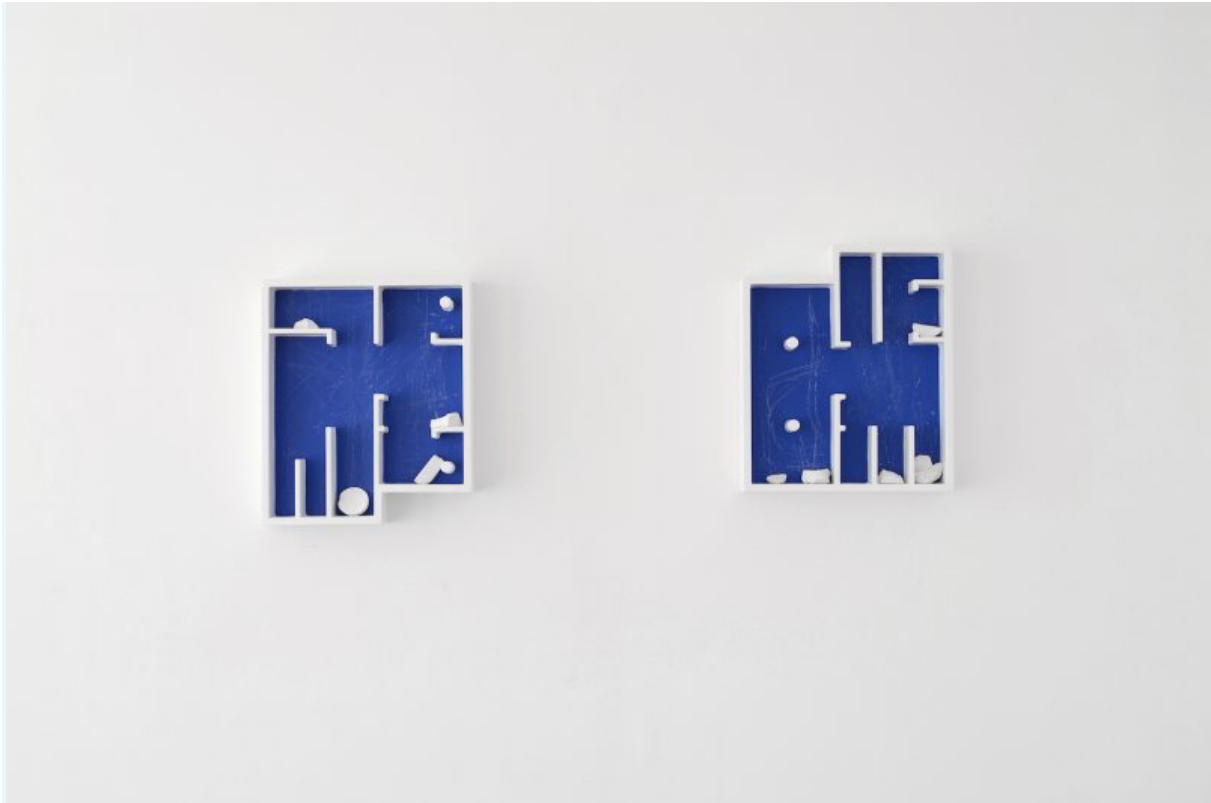
Ana Bidart, video still from *La idea de fondo*, 2020. Video 2'46" no sound. Photo: Laura Orozco.

Time is a major theme in Ana's work and has been especially important since her move in 2020 to the Yucatán peninsula in Mexico, where she lives in the regional capital, Mérida. The city is situated near Chicxulub, the site of an asteroid impact some 66 million years ago, which triggered the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event, wiping out three-quarters of plant and animal life on earth. Constituting both a dramatic ending and the beginning of all that came after, including the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, the impact of the asteroid produced a vast crater that is estimated to measure 180 kilometres across. Learning about the Chicxulub impact and visiting its site provided fertile ground for many of the questions that have since grown around Ana's artistic practice. A particularly resonant feature of the crater is its line of iridium, a chemical element that is rare on earth but common in asteroids, which constitutes one of the geological strata at the site. Ana thinks of this line as a graphic mark, something that might be interpreted either like a line of text or a line of drawing, and in which "you can read history". This notion, along with the sculptural quality of the asteroid and its impact crater, has inspired several works, including the video *La idea de fondo* (The underlying idea/The background idea), 2020, which alludes to the omnipresence of human concept even in relation to events that took place long before we appeared on the surface of the planet. For this work, Ana used large spheres of chalk to create aleatory drawings on a broad tract of tarmacked ground, rolling the heavy balls around to mark the dark surface, and filming the action and resulting composition from a drone. Ultimately, what attracts Ana to drawing is the movement inherent in the practice. Working with the chalk balls, spherical bodies made from a substance composed of the skeletal remains of sea creatures from tens of millions of years ago, was a process of moving and learning, "from zero, how the body, tools, and surface operate." For Ana, it was important to establish a relationship of equals between these elements and "to create a mutual negotiation" between them.



Ana Bidart, video still from *La idea de fondo*, 2020. Video 2'46" no sound. Drone: Cuauhtémoc Moreno

There is something precious about the primary gesture of learning something new; of going from a condition of not-knowing to one of knowing. This transition is one that Ana sets up for herself time and time again in the processes she uses to create her art. But if Ana's work raises important questions about learning, it is also about how we access a type of unlearning, a shedding of our conditioning, which may be limiting our ability to open to the realities surrounding us, for example by preventing us from seeing how time actually moves in the world before us and how it has always been much more than just an abstract sequence of numbers governing our behaviours. The freedom and unpredictability inherent in the movement of the heavy chalk spheres exceed intention and scale, they permit thinking through doodling, thinking outside the box, beyond language and the page, in ways that use the body, material, and space in new ways. These unknown quantities and qualities are important, because not-knowing provides a grounding for discovery, yet it is seldom celebrated for the rare and valuable opportunities it offers. As Ana asks, "where can we get that experience in our world? Where is it ok for us, as adults, to really learn from zero? And how can we value the not-knowing that is the precursor to learning?"



Ana Bidart, Casa II and IV, 2020. Wood, acrylic paint and plaster, 47 x 40 x 9.5 cm each. Exhibition view of Casa XII at Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico City.

One way to do this is by setting up conditions for play. It may seem paradoxical that systems and structures have to be devised and put into place in order for play to be possible, but the truth is that every game needs at least some parameters. Rather than thinking of structure and play, rules and freedom, discipline and spontaneity as binaries, perhaps it's useful to recognise them as co-arising realities.



Ana Bidart, *Una los puntos (esquina) and (mano)*, 2020, detail.

In a spirit of playful experimentation, during her residency at Delfina Foundation in Spring 2023, Ana worked on a series of what she calls 'soft diaries': sheets of primed canvas stitched together into books, roughly A3 in size. Site-specificity is inherent in Ana's practice, which for her means that she tries to make works that could not be made in any other place in the same way. Her works are connected to the site where they are made, whether that is a room, an outdoor environment, or a stretched canvas. Thus, in the same way that she used spaces, materials and her own body to create the works already discussed, she set about using the Delfina house, the diaries, and herself to create a series of new "site-specific" works. In a creative process guided by a series of unplanned and unknown events, she decided to let one of her diaries "read the room", leaving its pages open to collect dust as it lay on the floor in the house, making it vulnerable to the movement of people around the building by balancing it on the staircase, and standing it up with its pages fanned out so that it could "look out the window". Over time the diary gathered particles of dust and matter, as well as invisible traces of light exposure and other, more intangible, forms of energy from the house and its inhabitants.



Ana Bidart, soft diaries, 2023

Being in London led Ana to think about travel and correspondence, as well as the tradition of epistolary literature. Marvelling at the way writing can bring people together across time and space, she used another of her diaries to develop a system for long-distance writing. Inserting distance into the act of writing itself, she attempted to make a sentence that might also be a line, by releasing drops of ink from an eyedropper held out of one of the windows in the house onto the open pages of the diary, laid out on the ground of the courtyard below. As she did this, she deliberately avoided thinking about specific words, and the resulting line speaks in a universal language of liquids that evokes a garland of blue tears falling from the heavens, or a morse code message set out in ocean-blue water.



Ana Bidart, soft diaries, 2023



Ana Bidart, soft diaries, 2023

In a third diary, Ana explored her interest in the invisible fingerprints dotted around the Delfina house, wondering, “what if we could see them, what would they tell us about the house’s history?” Using an ink pad, she ‘typed’ out an image using her fingertips on the canvas, not thinking of a particular message, but rather channelling ideas, and

generating a visual composition whose form is reminiscent of the layout of a text. We cannot help but impute meaning to the arrangement of inky fingerprints, but we can also open to the possibility that this may not be a cryptic text, but rather a drawing, or something that bears the qualities of both, but remains indefinable.



Ana Bidart, soft diaries, 2023

Ana is still processing these recent experiments. Like the rest of her work, they use a minimal aesthetic and simple materials, and refrain from guiding our interpretation in a certain direction. Rather, like the best stories, they leave enough space for our imagination to feel welcome, for us to find ourselves in what we are experiencing, and perhaps even allow ourselves to play within the subtle structures she has set up.



Ana Bidart, *Swimming Room*, 2021. Exhibition view, site-specific installation at Nada House, New York with Josée Bienvenu Gallery. Wooden floor, acrylic paint, chalk spheres, engraved wooden panels. Variable dimensions. Photo NADA.

– Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer based in London.

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