

## ON THE BEACH OF TIME

SEBASTIAN FASTHUBER

Gerlinde Thuma was well prepared for her trip to Chile, where Valparaiso's seaport allowed her to study the confrontation between water and land in concentrated form. For relaxation, the Lower Austrian artist spent Christmas in the desert.

Gerlinde Thuma is not one of those artists who need chaos to be creative. Nor are drastic changes of direction evident in her work. Thuma has steadily pursued her vision for more than 20 years, exploring nature and time in paintings that are often structured in two parts. She was nevertheless excited by the opportunity to pick up and move to a distant land for four months. "I had actually been looking for something new," she says, "so the timing was right."

Thuma lives in Gablitz, a suburb of Vienna, with the composer Reinhard Süß and their musically inclined daughter, Tanja. Their apartment and her studio are in a loft conversion with a view of the countryside. From there she journeyed 12,000 kilometers to Valparaiso, Chile. It was her first trip to South America. Curiosity therefore played a role in her choice of destination. However, two factors proved decisive: "One was the unique geographical location and shape of the country. You've got 4,700 kilometers of coastline and seven climatic zones, the gigantic Pacific Ocean, the vastness." The other factor was that "Chile is the safest South American country for a woman travelling alone."

Thuma's working method could be said to consist of careful planning and the ability to cut loose at the right moment and allow for spontaneity. She began preparing for her trip systematically. She did her research and chose the port city of Valparaiso over the capital, Santiago, based on its more attractive climate. The next step was to collect addresses and recommendations from people she knew. Ultimately she found a suitable apartment and studio on *La Matriz*, the oldest square in the city.

"Paz Undurraga and Michael Bier, a Chilean/Austrian architect couple, rent out apartments and run an exhibition space, the DUC. That's how I met local artists. I felt integrated and at the same time had my privacy." For peace and quiet, however, she had to retreat to her studio. Her living quarters faced a lively square with a church, and the noise level remained high day and night. Her studio was at the back of the house next door and overlooked a small courtyard.

The underlying theme of the "changing views" program was self-fulfilling for the artist. A few weeks after returning to Austria, Thuma confirms that "yes, something did change." She is still feeling the effects of "interrupting your normal life for four straight months and getting used to a different routine. When I came home I felt disoriented. You slip back into a familiar world but in fact you're still somewhere else."

It had been the same on her arrival in Chile, where she faced a completely blank and at the same time confusingly crowded canvas. "First you have to adjust to the new situation and

learn how to deal with the four-month timeframe. Apart from adapting the studio to my needs and buying painting materials, I had to absorb all these new impressions. At the beginning I was overwhelmed by the images around me, and really. There's massive sensory overload on the retina."

No sooner had she arrived than she underwent a crash course in local conditions. Her flight got into Valparaiso three hours late. After having travelled for nearly 24 hours, she made her way to the apartment she had booked only to find that no one was there to let her in. Passersby immediately came to her aid, warning her to keep a close eye on her luggage. Someone phoned the police to come and protect her. "It was in broad daylight," she says. "The people there are very eager to provide assistance. But it isn't always available when you need it. You get used to the situation and learn to stay alert." Helping her acclimatize was Claudia Vásquez Gómez, a performance artist who the previous year had taken part in an artist-in-residence program in Krems, Austria. She made it much easier for Thuma to manage seemingly routine tasks such as tracking down painting materials. "All I had with me was black in the form of charcoal and a white pigment I use for glazing." Not knowing her way around and only moderately fluent in Spanish, Thuma was grateful for the support.

Once she was settled in she could turn her mind to work. As much as she enjoys taking a break to meet fellow artists, for example at conferences, in her working life the self-described lone warrior values solitude. She sees her periods of intensive work in Chile as "almost like going on retreat, or withdrawing to a monastery." During this time "I didn't do much talking and really appreciated the peace and quiet, which normally isn't possible – at home you can't avoid talking."

To her surprise, Thuma gradually sensed the reemergence of something she hadn't experienced for a long time: the natural rhythm in which she had lived during her student days and in her early years as an artist before she started a family. "I was astonished that this other rhythm still existed, and that I could live in it. In the beginning I didn't know how to handle so much freedom. I felt logistically not challenged enough because the phone wasn't ringing and there wasn't even any paperwork waiting for me. All of a sudden I could use the whole day to formulate questions about the meaning of life. And such questions can crop up fairly drastically." In general, however, she simply enjoyed the respite from the pressures of daily life, her usual work and the art scene back home.

She candidly describes her career as being marked by "constant ups and downs." That never stops. "You have to stay visible and always keep at it. When I finished my studies there was a lot of demand for painting thanks to the *Junge Wilde* movement. Then it sort of died down. It's not easy to create a continuous body of work." From an early age Gerlinde Thuma, who was born in Vienna in 1962, liked to draw. By concentrating on a picture the way other children lost themselves in a book or music, she could immerse herself in a world to which she alone had access.

"That idea is as attractive as ever," she says with a smile. Already in high school she transferred to an art school. From 1981-88 she studied painting and animated film with the artist Maria Lassnig – "a challenging figure in every way" – at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. While still a student she was introduced to "the jungle out there" by taking part in exhibitions and working in galleries.

Thuma lived in the center of Vienna only during her university years. Her apartment was behind the *Votivkirche* church. Having grown up in an outer district in the western part of the city and in the neighboring province of Lower Austria, she prefers being on the outskirts. The area where she lives today, Gablitz in Lower Austria, is a peaceful country setting, next to wooded land managed by the Austrian Federal Forests company. Her paintings are connected to nature and influenced by her immediate environment. The curator Silvie Aigner has referred to “nature as a silent witness” in Thuma’s work.

Thuma’s interest in time, change and impermanence is reflected in a deceleration of colors and forms. The pictures do not reveal themselves at a glance. Viewers must shift down a gear and slow down their gaze to appreciate them properly. The pace at which she works is also slow and steady. Thuma works intensively, but with deliberation. After three or four hours she takes a break from the studio. In Valparaiso she would walk to the seaport to clear her head. “There’s not much point in my spending the whole day with the pictures,” she explains. “Every time, when I come back to them, I have a fresher view.”

After she returned from Chile she had to stretch the predominantly large-scale canvases she had painted there all over again, “because in Chile there weren’t any real stretching frames that could be retightened. I transported the pictures rolled up.” It didn’t take long for her to resume work in her studio. At home she found it easier to think about the paintings and finish them, she says. “Being away gave me a new appreciation of my own workplace.”

A tour of the studio makes clear that the dramatic confrontation between water and land so characteristic of the Chilean landscape had a strong impact on the work she produced during her stay. In *Sog* (Undertow), the ocean appears as a vast blue presence which, the longer one looks at it, projects both the merciless strength of water and an endless tranquility. Thuma says Chileans rarely go swimming. Instead, they walk on the beach. “Thanks to the Humboldt Current the Pacific is very cold. The beaches are wonderful but you can’t spend much time in the water. It’s a completely different beach experience.”

Her series *Derrelicto* explores the debris which “the ocean spits out and then sucks back in. It doesn’t matter whether you see water or sand in the pictures. The point is the structure, which appears very compacted to the eyes of the viewer.” In the series *Strategie* (Strategy), everything in Chile appears to come in droves. Hundreds, if not thousands of birds dive from the sky to catch fish. “I was fascinated by the organization of life and survival within this density and variety.”

She experienced other anomalies as well. There was no rainfall in Valparaiso from the time she arrived at the end of November 2009 until she left at the end of March 2010. What did fall was dew from the trees. “People catch the dew with nets,” she says, “and use this water that drips from the air!” Thuma was fortunate that during the earthquake season she never happened to be in the worst affected areas. Summarizing her South American experiences she says, “One sees what can happen in life. Here in Central Europe we lead unbelievably privileged lives.”

In Chile Thuma was able to fulfill her lifelong dream of spending time in a desert. When her daughter came to visit her with some friends, they spent Christmas Eve in an uninhabited oasis in the Atacama Desert, at an altitude of over 2,000 meters. “All around us were volcanic cones. Over our heads a huge starry sky. There was even some vegetation. Those first 12 days

in the desert exceeded all my expectations.” Once again: “Yes, something did change.”