

Johanna Unzueta
Mercury & Hula Hoop

Seen from above, a girl spins and twirls, her Converse sneakers beating a rhythm on the concrete pavement below her, her body making an introspective choreography, inside and outside, around, through, and below a plastic hoop. The hoop twirls on her wrist, encircles her waist. It becomes an extension of her body, a cipher for her imagination. It contains her even as she controls its spiraling movements. Filmed in black & white Super-8, Johanna Unzueta's *Dinamarca: Mercurio y Hula Hoop* (2016) is a joyful and introspective meditation on line and space, on drawing with the body, on containment and elegant solutions to its imposition.

Unzueta's drawings are titled after the place and time in which they are made: *May, June 2016 New York*, for example, or *June New York, July Santiago 2016*. These delicate circular geometries, made with watercolor and pastel pencil on tinted paper, could be the paths of the hula hoop, all of them connected together in a script or a kind of intuitive dance notation. The ovals and overlapping circles, their lines upon lines upon lines broken by small dots, sometimes by pin holes, have natural world precedents: these could be the mirrored patterns of a moth's wings, the geometries implied by flower petals. The tracks of Unzueta's pencil are precise, yet organic: there is evidence here of the hand of the artist, we can trace her paths as she circles around. Here, as in the movements of the hoop, there is a subtle richness between precision and variation, between containment and its soft edges.

In *Dinamarca: Mercurio y su Jardín* (2016), these patterns and geometries enter the space of the garden. The film opens with a washy image of the sculpture of Mercury atop a building. The god of travelers, of poetry, of trickery, Mercury also guides souls to the underworld. In his garden, then, Unzueta follows a metal spiral staircase into the mysterious, leafy world. Surrounded by greenery, the ornate white metal railing and its ornamental plant-like design make a tension between real and imagined, between industrial design and nature.

Founded at the start of the 17th century, the Copenhagen Botanical Garden's iconic glass conservatory--the building within which Unzueta sites much of *Mercurio y su Jardín*--dates to 1874. Like London's Crystal Palace (1851), the Palm House at Schönbrunn Palace Park in Vienna (1881), and the Temperate House at London's Kew Royal Botanic Gardens (1860), Copenhagen's Botanical Garden is a relic of the Victorian era's fascination with industrial design for plant life: to build a glass house for plants is a complicated gesture of care, of preservation, and of defiance against the laws of the natural world. Giant lilies from Brazil's Amazon region could now be cultivated in England's cruel winters, for example, could be re-christened for Queen Victoria, could be "owned." Unzueta's *Mercurio y su Jardín*, finds subtle magics in this industrial juxtaposition. Indeed, the texture of Super-8 film, with its unique temporality is a stark contrast to the idea of a technological future-looking that the garden building represents. Unzueta intentionally looks backward instead. She emphasizes close looking, allows the edges of plants to blur out, the green and warm brown hues of the film to be washed away by bright rays of light from above. The eye is an imprecise tool, and she asks the camera to mimic the experience of imperfect looking. Her camera traces the lines of the steel building, looks out the window, walks around the perimeter of the elevated walkway. She places her intricate geometric drawings between panes of glass, making them freestanding forms, elevated on wooden plinths. The viewer walks in circles around them, encircles them, makes loops.

Unzueta's garden is, she tells us, el Jardín de Psyche. The center of thought, feeling, and motivation, the psyche is the heart of our conscious and unconscious responses to our environments. A mortal who is turned to a goddess after a series of trials, Psyche is married to Eros, is the goddess of the soul, is symbolized by the butterfly.

In his hallucinatory autobiographical text about a descent into madness, Gerard de Nerval finds a kind of surreal interconnectedness in the natural world: "...everything in Nature took on a new aspect, and secret voices, warning and exhorting me, came from plants, trees, animals, and the most lowly insects," he writes. "...formless, inanimate objects lent themselves to the calculations of my mind; from combinations of pebbles, from shapes in corners, chinks or openings, from the outlines of leaves, colors, sounds, and smells, emanated for me hitherto unknown harmonies... Everything lives, moves, everything corresponds; the magnetic rays, emanating either from myself or from others, cross the limitless chain of created things unimpeded; it is a transparent network which covers the world, and its slender threads communicate themselves by degrees to the planets and stars." Like many of his contemporaries in mid-19th century Paris, de Nerval was fascinated by the surreal possibilities within the garden, the strange dreams and obsessions it opens and allows.

Unzueta reads about social structures and their models in the natural world. She studies bees. She goes to silent film screenings and records the sounds of people laughing and clapping, the tinkling piano accompaniment to the films. These are ways of finding patterns from the natural world, of understanding patterning as part of lived experience. As Unzueta's camera draws in close to the wings of a moth, they become indistinct, they melt into ambiguous colors and movements. "Before we knew how to circle the earth, how to circumscribe the sphere of human habitation in days and hours, we had brought the globe into our living rooms to be touched by our hands and swirled before our eyes," writes Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Unzueta's sensitive spiraling geometries, each one an intricate record of a place and moment in time, swirls the world before our eyes. The girl hops through the hoop, lifting both feet off the ground. Sometimes, in nature or geometry or in dream states, everything takes on a new aspect, emanates new harmonies. And, for a moment, the girl flies.

Laura A. L. Wellen
November 2016

1. Gerard de Nerval, *Aurélia: Or Life and the Dream*, trans. Geoffrey Wagner (Boston: Exact Change, 1996), 57.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 251.