

Galerie Noah Klink

Nearest the Source

On *Source*, an exhibition by Xavier Robles de Medina

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source (*n.*) mid-14c., "support, base," from Old French *source* "a rising, beginning, fountainhead of a river or stream" (12c.), fem. noun taken from the past participle of *sourdre* "to rise, spring up," from Latin *surgere* "to rise, arise, get up, mount up, ascend," a contraction of *surrigere*, from an assimilated form of *sub-* "up from below" + *regere* "to keep straight, guide" (from PIE root *reg-* "move in a straight line," with derivatives meaning "to direct in a straight line," thus "to lead, rule"). The meaning "a first cause, an origin" is attested from late 14c., as is "fountain-head of a river." The meaning "person or written work supplying information or evidence" is by 1777. also — a generative force : cause¹

In *Source*, Xavier Robles de Medina confronts the concealed lineages that shape what we see: relics—land-based, human, futuristic, digital, and historical—are set before us as an archive of the present. Drawn from material ranging from contemporary media to sources predating 1850, each work requires a gaze into its histories to trace the power structures at work within it. Each seeks to reveal what hegemonic power actively suppresses, namely the conditions that produced this moment, softened and denied across crises, from ecological collapse born of coloniality to the under- and over-development of lands and peoples through racial exploitation and gendered violence; imperial-capitalist disaster. Psychiatrist-philosopher Frantz Fanon laid bare colonial architectures as governing a people's present and future by reaching backward into the past, hollowing it out and rewriting what it finds to bend, disfigure, and break the continuity and agency of the colonized.² Against this severing and alongside strategies of survival, Xavier Robles de Medina calls for the reconstruction of memory. Like a river breaking open at its mouth, Robles de Medina's work disperses what it has absorbed, propelling it toward an end that looks back on itself, with what it holds pressing to be heard. We begin with the notion of *source* itself. Where does each source come from? What remains alive within its initial form, and what is altered by the forces that transfigure it? What does it carry through bodies, elements, and time?

A source is a field of movement as well as a point of origin, rising from underground to break the surface. It is a channel that stores memory of what it contains, dormant or awake. To follow a source is to *ascend from below*, guided by what the surface may disguise. The word spans multiple senses at once: emergence, inception, body of evidence. Robles de Medina paints and sculpts in each register simultaneously, taking this etymological field as his working ground. He initiates his paintings and pieces from a source image in digital circulation (a news frame, film still, archival photograph), slowly retrieving its smallest marks with photographic precision so that they start to speak. We peer closely at his exacting rendering to perceive submerged histories, undervalued bodies, and violences humming beneath the visible order. Every image is a source whose effects ripple downstream. Source also carries a sacred aspect as the origin of all life, which systems of power have sought to strip away by compressing the animate to a bare, manipulated root. This sacred dimension pushes back from the inside to defy erasure.

¹ "Source (*n.*)," Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/source>; "Source," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/source>.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

From these tensions, we are guided into what obliges our attention as Robles de Medina bids us to probe these sites with him. Through the labor of his meticulous painting, he reanimates sources and their surroundings. His works compel us to feel the life still emitted from its figures, or to behold where the subject is implicated in harm, interrogating who and what takes life away.

Every piece entails the same discipline: a grid placed directly over a source with its translation held to the increment, so the image exists unchanged. This fidelity stems from the artist's premise that reality is stranger than fiction. The task, then, is to maintain a direct conduit to what a source shows and tells. Read as evidence, each work asks us to track the trajectory of its image and the context of its arrival. Read as the fountainhead of a river, each showcases what continues to surge and revolt from a source when extraction, assault, or neglect attempt to seal it over. Running beneath both readings is a further claim that a source shelters a charge even when what surrounds its becoming has been seized. Robles de Medina's chosen archives assemble images inscribed by the systems that produced them, prying open the questions embedded in their transmission, while their subjects are positioned from, or against, machineries of authority. His labor of painting, layer upon layer, returns them to the physical, made embodied and fleshy again. In that return, he brings us to what has slipped from view or been taken from our memory, reinvesting it with weight to be newly witnessed and examined. Robles de Medina presents these sources to us, so we can meet the gazes staring back.

Theorist Tina Campt's *Listening to Images* offers a method for this looking. Engaging Black archives mediated by colonial and state frameworks designed to classify, contain, or erase, Campt listens beyond sight, attuning the senses to the affective frequencies a photograph harbors beneath its official presentation.³ Quiet, she insists, registers sonically and cannot be conflated with silence, as it is an intensity that commands a different kind of listening. In it, Campt hears refusal as a swarm vibrating inside the frames, infused with the low frequencies of resistance and subversion that underlie its fabric. Robles de Medina's work enacts a parallel practice. He describes his own conceptual approach as sourcing with the credits visible, an act that explicitly invokes and mirrors its reference in a candid reckoning with the tangle of reality itself.

Four works, and one police account, invite listening to what comes *up from below* throughout the exhibition, all built from a source carrying its own logic and questions of survival, infliction, or rebellion. A painting drawn from Zoe Saldaña's motion-capture performance as Neytiri in *Avatar: Fire and Ash* renders a body as a matrix of trackable information. In the film, Neytiri guides the colonizer-soldier Jake Sully into her people's ways and becomes his lover; she then leads her family in defense of a world being mined by a corporation for a precious mineral, endangering their ecosystem—a circumstance eerily echoing our Earth's own. A second painting turns a photograph of Prince Andrew into a study of exposure, its title from a Guardian editorial headline calling the "aghost eyes" a match for Edvard Munch's *Scream*, a red point burning in the pupil at the image's center. It is the first photograph taken after his arrest, disclosed through the Epstein files on suspicion of misconduct in public office; the files document a cruelty

³ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 9.

Christopher Columbus imposed upon Indigenous girls of the Caribbean five centuries before,⁴ a pattern perpetuated by successive agents of the patriarchal elite who built networks of sexual exploitation and impunity. A cast bronze, its title lifted from the Berlin Ethnological Museum's record, rebuilds a possibly Maroon Saamaka or Creole figure taken from Suriname's Meylwijks Plantation to its original scale, one that a hand can hold. Collected before 1850 by the German "collector" Johann Jansa, the figure's maker is recorded only as "(?)", marked unknown; the figure, felt as a sacred subject, incites scrutiny into the looting of sacred subject-objects from Indigenous worlds. Her vessel is forged into gold in its new maker's hands, a futuristic embodiment spanning time and space. She is re-dignified as a vessel to which spirit may return, in defiance of the operations of expropriation that consigned her to the chemical storerooms of the west.

Beside these, a sprawling new painting based on a photograph honoring the work of Augusta Curiel, Surinamese photographer, hosts a plantation's coffee bush in bloom on a Dutch plantation. The piece's title establishes it as *Plantation Clevia, 1904–1937, National Museum of World Cultures, Amsterdam, object no. 60006266*. Coffee, a crop whose abundance built the wealth of the western empire as it undermined the communities and regions that cultivated it, asserts itself as a witness, its blossoms testifying to the labor and violence inherent in the plantation order. Since the mid-nineteenth century⁵, the Dutch museum that now possesses its photograph has repeatedly renamed itself, excising the word "colonial" from its title and sanitizing its institutional legacy. Set apart from the four, the fifth piece arrives as a sibling statement. An original document, it brings to the surface the contemporary structures abiding in the rest: a federal police commissioner's closing report on the artist's own stop at the German-Dutch border. Its medium given, pointedly, as laser print on paper, presenting the unresolved bureaucratic record of Robles de Medina's encounter of racial profiling. Each work uproots the conditions of its making—the histories that produced the subjects as we see them; the damage swelling up from below; the demands issued to us by the atmospheres rising from within the *sources*; and the question of who continues to profit from commanding historical frames.

For Robles de Medina, an artist from Suriname and of the Americas, the distance between an origin and its unraveling assumes an added significance. In regions permeated by shadows of colonialism, where histories are ongoing struggles over memory, representation, and power, Robles de Medina treats each work as an archival intervention. He elevates the utterances of voices the hegemonic record leaves unspoken, showing how they go on speaking for those who, like him, listen from positions of marginality or accountability. Philosopher Édouard Glissant gives language for this relational condition, in which voice and identity form and act back through connection. For Glissant, voices are always situated in a collective field, "Relation relinks (relays), relates",⁶ he writes. Relation is a porous weave with every utterance inflected by

⁴ Andrés Reséndez, interview by Shankar Vedantam, "An American Secret: The Untold Story of Native American Enslavement," *Hidden Brain*, NPR, November 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/20/565410514/an-american-secret-the-untold-story-of-native-american-enslavement>.

⁵ History Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, <https://amsterdam.wereldmuseum.nl/en/about-wereldmuseum-amsterdam/history-wereldmuseum-amsterdam>.

⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 171.

the sociopolitical forces that bring it into being. The word *source* points to a history running toward *regere*—a single straight line, a guide, a root. Robles de Medina takes this at its most linear, as a grid bound to its source, and restores to Relation: every work woven by crossings formed in economies of extraction, until they become fields of testimony and response.

II. The Wretched / A Haunting

My God is the living God,
God of the impertinent exile.
An outcast who carved me
into an outcast carved
by sheer and stony will
to wander the desert
in search of deliverance
the way a mother hunts
for her wayward child.
God of each eye fixed to heaven,
God of the fallen water jug,
of all the hope a vessel holds
before spilling to barren sand.
God of flesh hewn from earth
and hammered beneath a will
immaculate with the power
to bear life from the lifeless
like a well in a wasteland

.....

I've kissed the fingertips
of my dark and mortal God.
She has shown me the truth
behind each chiseled blow
that's carved me into this life,
the weight any woman might bear
to stretch her mouth toward her
one true God, her own
beaten, marble song.

— Tyehimba Jess, *Hagar In The Wilderness, Carved Marble*. Edmonia Lewis, 1875 ⁷

In poet Tyehimba Jess's *Hagar in the Wilderness*, God is found in carved stone, in the exile's story, and in the hand of a maker. Source and divinity gather in the flesh of the wretched and in all beings—living and speaking, or without language as we know it—as each takes shape in matter. Edmonia Lewis carved Hagar's marble figure in Rome in 1875, in the decade following American slavery, bringing forth the story of an enslaved Egyptian woman cast into the

⁷ Tyehimba Jess, "Hagar in the Wilderness: Carved Marble, Edmonia Lewis, 1875," first published in *Poem-a-Day*, Academy of American Poets, 26 December 2013, and collected in *Olio* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016).

wilderness. The daughter of a Black father and an Ojibwe mother, she gave her Hagar clasped hands raised in prayer with an empty water jug at her feet. Lewis's Hagar stands alone, addressing only her God. She worked within the dominant neoclassical tradition during a period when biblical allegory was the century's primary language and the route by which she, a Black and Native American sculptor, could speak of her own condition. There in the wilderness where Hagar was left to die, an angel's voice rescues her, with her God opening her eyes to a well of water bursting forth in a wasteland, with life borne among the ruins of the damned. Jess's poem allows us to hear the marble's voice: a carved woman claiming her own maker as a dark, mortal, and female God. From the marble's reaches, we attune ourselves to the origin story of Hagar's wound, singing in unison with Lewis's own social and historical world. Like Hagar at the well, the figures in Robles de Medina's works stand amid abandonment with water still rising. He, too, reinvigorates voices as he paints and sculpts. Looking to the wretched and the mechanisms that produce them with the same painstaking devotion as Lewis, he asks where their ghosts lead and what wells might yet spring open in the wilderness.

In the company of Jess and Lewis, Robles de Medina listens for voices lodged in matter. The voices Robles de Medina draws out form a ghostly presence that scholars Eve Tuck and C. Ree, in "A Glossary of Haunting," describe as both acute and general, noting that individuals are haunted, but so are societies.⁸ Their glossary provides terms for what lingers in a frame, object, or environment after the shutter closes, the maker departs, or time passes—the afterimage, the seething presence, and the past and future tenses pulsating in the figures inhabiting these works, in fellowship with the scarred. Robles de Medina's monk-like attention stays with a single image until its seething presence comes alive to whisper and shout. Attending to the lingering ghosts, close listening uncovers what records and institutions try to silence as the stories that pulse unceasingly in the voices of matter. Through this practice of listening, *Source* articulates an ethics as much as a methodology, directing focus to who and what has been undermined. Robles de Medina's works urge us to map the societies that produce these complexes, attesting to the disordered formations that conspire to bind us to the material aftermaths of an enduring coloniality. Among these aftermaths persists a circuitry of mobility and disclosure, marking who moves freely, who is believed, who is exposed, and how long impunity lasts for individuals and systems. In this configuration, the ghosts of the present find voice, haunting us through the subjects Robles de Medina resurrects into another state of life, as we are summoned to answer.

– Nayaa Krugman

⁸ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 639–58.