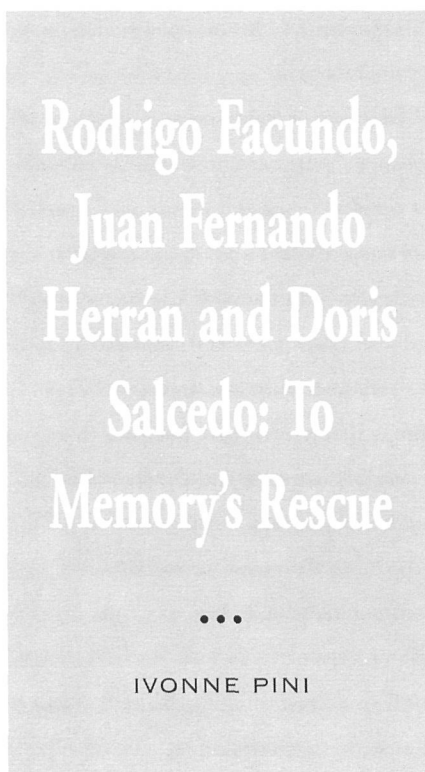


Within Colombian art's characteristically-varied range of subject matter, certain artists are focusing on memory: it is a concern that, from various outlooks, entails confronting a culture in which amnesia and the tendency toward forgetting prevail. The obsession with memory that is so frequently found in contemporary art can be perceived from different points of view, and the three artists selected for this essay are important examples of the multiplicity of options.

However, all three share the underlying need to reconsider the past so that it might cease being a mere reference to what has already happened. Their insistence on factual memory is not a simple zeal for recollection, nor is there a search for foundational myths and unquestionable truths of the collective unconscious. The issue here is to comprehend, to make others comprehend and to become aware of the codes according to which their surrounding society is structured, a society in which violence is a daily fact of life.

In regions pressured by guerrilla warfare, paramilitary forces and the drug trade, it is very difficult to separate the private from the public space. Violence affects every sector of society as an everyday event, creating the risk that the situation might breed indifference and might be considered habitual.

In confronting all of this, Facundo, Herrán and Salcedo present artistic responses that are far from homogeneous, indicating the different ways in which they conduct their reflections while experiencing a single environment.



Rodrigo Facundo, who was born in Ibagué, Colombia, in 1958, has centred his work around a single theme: a meditation on the configuration of individual and collective memory. It is an issue that continues to be linked to an important Latin American concern: the sense of identity.

What is the relation between the notion of wanting to know who we are and the manner in which we handle memory? This is the question that appears repeatedly as an undercurrent of his conceptual formulations. And reality in turn becomes a space for the reconstruction of a world in which he observes both his own individuality (as well as the medium in which he is immersed), gathering these resources into an archive where he stores the rescuing, recontextualising images.

In the early 90's his paintings began to introduce highly-textural

surfaces that increasingly incorporated photography. Facundo assumes the photographic image to be a reflection of the past, recalling Susan Sontag's statement that "All photographs are *momento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in the mortality, vulnerability and immutability of someone or something else". They represent an opportunity to seize a given moment, to reveal the passage of time, and offer the dual option of being either a presence or a memory. In addition, they allow both a yearning for and a reconstruction of another reality. They are the mark left by an instant that has already passed. To evoke, to record ambiguous forms, to think how events are filtered in our memory – with these capabilities photography is able to reconstruct a reality divergent from the original event.

In the 1991 series *Instantes y huellas* he combines two elements freighted with meaning – photography and mud – and makes objects that seek to affect our senses directly. By concealing the photographic processes, he leads the spectator to re-encounter them, lost in the accidents of the mud, where art historical personages flourish along with anonymous figures and natural disasters are retrieved by photography's memory from assured oblivion. Moreover, he examines painting's traditional support structure (canvas and frame) as well as the traditional tools of pictorial representation (oil and brush, etc.).

The sense of a funerary site, of loss and of elaborate grieving, is specified more diaphanously in *Luz perpetua*

from 1992. Death, violence and the memory of disappeared persons have become a constant for those who live and suffer through daily existence in Colombia. Facundo attempts to sublimate the quotidian and to see it in a more poetic light, to reorganise it by recomposing the fragments from memory. He covers photographs with a diffusing layer of wax and then places them into small niches that were lined up in a row, as in a cemetery. Memory and the past became present in our perception.

In the photographic sequences *Luz perpetua* and *10S* (2), the supporting material begins to crack, deteriorating with the passage of time, and – as in life – all that remains are the emotive qualities draped by the present onto static images of the past. But at the same time there is a play of ambiguous shapes; the wax functions as a filter, recovering the event as memory and inducing the spectator to rescue, yet again, the events of the past via the photographic sequence. Photography changes meaning: it is no longer the indifferently-observed newspaper image showing acts of violence. The way the negatives are printed onto the mud plates steers us toward a different analysis. The static presence of an anonymous face strives to incite the spectator to share the already-collective grief.

Perhaps recalling Baudrillard's meditations on objects, in 1993 Facundo began to mix common objects with anonymous figures. His *Objetos melancólicos* are cut-out figures, printed on paper and covered with wax and

intermingled with houseplants. Hanging against the wall they give a sense of fragility, of lightness and of potential disappearance. A variety of objects such as revolvers, bones and picture frames are camouflaged and allude to violence, both inside and outside the home. Violence permeates the atmosphere: death and history are spoken of. The things that accompany man are there, as are his memory and the marks he has made. Photography assists him in deepening the meaning and function of common objects, but at the same time it allows him to reconstruct history – death itself is ultimately recognisable in objects that serve as invitations to meditation.

In 1995 he returned to painting. Working with large canvases and availing himself of various techniques, he returned to an emphasis on the passage of time, on the fragmented rescue of remembrance and on the recovery of memory. Photography does not relinquish its central role, and in works such as *El rey de los animales* he includes enlarged photographic images that are based on images drawn from the religious iconography of the colonial period. And since memory itself is rescue, is not-forgetting, he begins to introduce them into the contemporary era. The fragments of different images that affect it are placed in a new context, a context in which there is an ample mix of reality, the subconscious and collective memory.

For Facundo, investigating memory is the path by which to approach his country, his city and his surroundings, reconstructing reality not

in order to generate mimetic visions but rather in search of answers to essential questions.

Historical and cultural memory constitute an ever-present duality in the work of Juan Fernando Herrán, who was born in Bogotá in 1963: he enters into issues of identity with an attitude that resembles that of an archaeologist. Beginning with the objects he made at the end of the '80's, Herrán explores the potential of clay, a material in itself infused with history. He shapes it with his eyes closed in order to lend the tactile aspect priority, thus leaving the mark of his fingers on irregular, expressive tools. The resulting objects are, to some extent, a Pre-Columbian allusion, but the allusion's function is far removed from that of the original. The aggression of the medium offers a peculiar perspective: it is possible to be an active or passive subject in relation to these unsettling tools which arouse latent, not explicit, feelings in the spectator.

They suggest Pre-Columbian forms yet they also suggest instruments of torture, and Herrán appeals referentially to memory so that the spectator's appraisal might be kept open. Herrán does not attempt to denounce, but rather, with neither stridency nor outbursts, to reveal objects as responses to the space that generated them. This dual reading also extends to the chosen material: uncooked clay brings to mind the cultures of the past, yet at the same time is so fragile that its condition is that of an ephemeral object.

While in London during the 90's,

he began investigating historical memory by means of objects made and presented as fossilised elements of present-day civilisation: in this age of disposability and industrial poisoning, he took advantage of non-conventional materials such as bones and hair.

Keeping in mind the relation between man and nature, his interest was directed toward the Thames and the other lost rivers of London, over which the city has grown and which, ultimately, have been enclosed and channeled into sewers as part of a sewage system that robs them of their essential function.

Using photography, drawings and text, Herrán attempts to trace the history that lies hidden behind this concealment. He reconstructs the routes of these domesticated elements of nature, using photographs of locations that were formerly important points of communication and today are no more than simple markers closed by heavy lids that conceal their initial purpose. And he uses drawings in order to transfer the canal maps onto the wall, showing us the current state of these repressed routes. The texts that are meticulously integrated into the other elements are by John Hollingshead, who in 1862 compiled descriptions of the sewage system's tunnels that coincide with the rivers' routes. The texts are marked by the peculiarity of, on the one hand, being highly technical, while on the other hand digressing into physical descriptions that include smell, colour and sound.

The questions raised by Herrán in this investigation are not directed

toward a study of nature as landscape, but rather toward the looming threat of urban growth, represented in mankind's insistence on distorting nature's functions. He directs his gaze toward nature in order to repositulate its traditional role as aesthetic object and source of beauty, forsaking the concept of landscape as a point of encounter between man and place.

While the river serves as the basis from which to critique repression, it also functions as a source for materials. He took the bones he found there and gathered them together, creating a ball of bones that become a sort of compendium of cultural references. His specific circumstances – a Latin American in a place to which he had been attracted but in which he felt himself a stranger – strengthened a tendency in his work; the powerful hand-made component surrounding each of his objects and installations gives credit to a constant in our midst – that not only the manual element holds importance but also the marked tendency of things to be recycled and to acquire functions that differ from the original ones. The ball of bones was used in an installation in London (*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*, 1993) and was the central component of the project sent to the 1994 Havana Biennial.

After a careful study of marine currents, he projected the ideal route by which the bones might reach Havana. He then placed them in a suitable container and launched it into the sea. Entitled *Lat 50° 02' N. Long 5° 40' W*, the project included drawings of the ideal route, texts and photos

of the launching and of the eventual disappearance of the container bearing the ball of bones, carried beyond the horizon by favourable currents. The texts were taken from a 19th-century navigation manual that describes the optimum route between Land's End on English coast and Havana. An object containing elements of a city's cultural memory was going from the edge of Europe to America, but this time the process pertained to a Latin American, hoping to arrive symbolically at a place from which others hope to flee.

Since his return to Bogotá in 1996, his investigations have returned to a local subject that has sparked commotion and controversy on the national level: known as the 8000 process, it refers to individuals in the public sphere who were accused of accepting contributions from drug dealers during the last presidential election campaign.

Herrán scrutinised the existing information in newspapers and magazines in order to trace the events and hone in on a single aspect: the moment of the cash delivery. Since there is no visual testimony of the event, he reconstructs the images of a historic event for which no record exists. Again, the work investigates reality in order to transform it into fiction. He prepared a scenario in which the concept of representation is closely related to cinema and staging. The representation holds the dual condition of being real (in that it is based on events that occurred) while becoming fiction (the staging of visual testimony that does not in fact exist).

Despite Herrán's perpetual receptivity to change (which sometimes presents obstacles to the course of his career), his work maintains an identifying constant: it revolves around a consideration of cultural and historic memory, a premise which thus far has been given primacy among the artist's conceptual concerns.

Since the time that Doris Salcedo (born in Bogotá in 1958) was awarded a prize at the 31st *Salón de Artistas de Colombia* in 1987, a line of investigation can be traced at the centre of her work: that is, preventing collective amnesia from forgetting the violence that reigns in Colombia. This attempt is undertaken with the clear consciousness of not being limited to "showing the violence" as an inherent Colombian condition – and is therefore difficult to modify. Her attitude goes beyond creating a direct impact with the image and makes suggestions so that the observer might recognise him or herself, if not in full, at least in certain aspects of daily life.

Salcedo's frequent trips to the Colombian regions where violence is felt in its crudest forms has allowed her to establish a direct relation with the victims, with their environment and with their objects. This attitude of listening and empathising makes it possible for her to recognise others' circumstances, to understand them and to transform them into images. Thus, intuition goes hand-in-hand with the theoretical investigation that precedes the actual execution of her sculptures.

Salcedo's work, with its marked political content, strives for a memory-based meditation on violence. Her

definition of art as condensed experience (3) is filled with deep historic meaning. The individual history of each person who protagonises an act of violence is intertwined with the histories of the rest of the community's members in places where public and private spaces are difficult to separate. Her aesthetic venture is based on the conviction that in order to develop an ethical consciousness, representation must be used as a political subject (4). And despite being based in such a specific medium, Salcedo creates images that allow her to appeal to the idea of suffering and death, not only in the restricted arena that inspires the work but also when projected onto other situations that have suffered loss, the pain of uprooting and collective grief. Thus her objects are taken from the real world and could belong to any of us; her chairs, cradles, cots, bureaus and doors awaken a painful exercise in the observer's memory. No observer can remain indifferent; these are life's fragments, these are archives of individuals who lived and felt and now are no more. Salcedo's sculptures become risky invitations toward exploration and each will be approached, regardless of location, from an inquiry into one's own memory. An invitation to share an experience is a way of breaking the silence with which the dead and disappeared tend to be forgotten. For Salcedo, stimulating memory is a way of provoking a discussion on the subject, of recognising its existence, of reconstructing its history into a present reality.

There has been an appreciable

change in her working method in the 90's. Work from the 80's took objects that alluded to the human body (hospital beds, cradles, benches) and manipulated them with organic materials in order to create the suggestion that violence had taken place. In the 90's, her approach to the recovery of violence has changed. While still working with recovered objects, she has entered into more direct contact with the victims' families, and to the earlier objects she has added drawn from domestic environments. Tables, chairs and clothing are carefully covered with cement; the object is present but its function has disappeared. It becomes a mute witness to experience that will never again be felt; it is a space that can not be inhabited. And thus it involves us in the contemporary problem of exile and displacement caused by violence, both of which are determining phenomena for a significant portion of today's society.

Disappearance and displacement caused by violence are aspects that Salcedo has elaborated on during the 90's. Two key works from this period are *Atrabiliarios* and *La Casa Viuda*. In the first, Salcedo attempts to shatter the anonymity of those who have disappeared, based on the perspective of those who have suffered the losses. In niches carved out along the length of a wall, she placed shoes that belonged to victims of indiscriminate violence. Each niche is then covered with the skin of an animal bladder that is sewn to the wall. The opaque material hinders vision into the interior of the niche, which is filled with the blurry outlines of multitudinous

shoes; the floor is lined with empty boxes also made of animal materials. These shoes, rescued from anonymity, remind us that they had a function, that they belonged to someone, that they are family relics: real presences in the face of absence. They help us remember that the person who used them once had a family and a place; they remain as testimony to a forced separation. These women's shoes directly invoke the drama of loss, summoning up not anonymous numbers but rather the reality that forces many people to live with the memory of an absent body in a way that converts objects into dramatic witnesses of loss.

The goal here is to show not violence, but rather its effects. The subject emerges from cold statistics in order to become part of the ritual of grief, of the recuperation of memory. What is being dealt with here is not "la Violencia" in some vague fashion, like an epidemic of illness which must be accepted with Christian resignation. Salcedo's goal is to provoke, since her work strives to confront both the acceptance of death as redemption as well as the passive role played by art spaces (galleries and museums) that content themselves with being depositories of oblivion. The enclosed shoes transform the museum into a more private place, into a place of commemoration, not so much for the dead as for those who survive and must assimilate the absence. They are a reflection of common history and common memory; it is a memory that struggles against forgetting, that is political, that refuses to cultivate

nostalgia but instead seeks to bring into the present the fact that these events happened and continue happening. *Atrabiliarios* insists that the horror lies not only in the violent fact but also in its forgetting, or in the resigned acceptance that considers it an irremediable event. At issue here is not memory as a means of subsequent forgetting; at issue here is helping raise consciousness and reinforcing memory.

La Casa Viuda seeks to describe a way of life in violent areas where there is no possibility of having a place of one's own. People are dragged from their homes and murdered in front of their families, or in other cases must emigrate in an attempt to save their lives. The objects inhabiting the space of *La Casa Viuda* refer to the role of refuge, of shelter, which once belonged to the house and was lost. The museum becomes an abandoned place. As Salcedo states: "*La Casa Viuda* makes precarious use of space, what Smithson called a nonsite; in other words, a transit zone which cannot be inhabited. Repositioning the sculptures in the space is a way of re-working memory. It is an approach to the spectator's consciousness, to disappearance and forced displacement, emphasising absence with dissipating images." (5)

Absence refers here to the occupied and abandoned place, and the retrieved objects that occupy it do not suggest the presence but rather the absence of those who were once the objects' users. The furnishings reveal the traces of violence and are transformed into commemorative

spaces that seek to lend art an ethical quality that might allow the establishment of a sensibility different from that which caused the crisis. History is not brought to a standstill, as is the case with most monuments; history is made problematic, and in this sense the works are anti-monuments.

With the same tenacity that is found in all her work, Doris Salcedo creates art out of the painful facets of Colombian life, seeking to make work that might relate the experiences undergone by those who have suffered violence directly; it is an approach free from vindication or denunciation, and which tries to understand, through empathy, what it means to have suffered the effects of violence. Working with small events and common objects, the sculptures overturn the necessity of personal familiarity with the situation. With them she constructs images that are not mere testimony but rather the memory of a reality that the observer tries – whether consciously or unconsciously – to ignore.

NOTES

- (1) Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. Spanish translation, *Sobre la fotografía*. Ed. Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1977. p. 25.
- (2) The title refers to the 108 police officers killed in Medellín, and the work utilises photographs from daily newspapers.
- (3) Conversation between the author and Doris Salcedo. August 1996.
- (4) Charles Merewether: *Doris Salcedo* in the catalogue for the exhibition *Ante América*, Bogotá, 1992. p. 161.
- (5) Conversation with Doris Salcedo, Natalia Gutierrez. *Art Nexus*, No. 19. p. 49.