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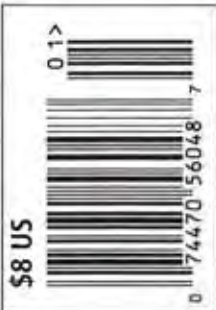
Grete Stern

Beatriz González

Grupo CADA

Mercosur Biennial

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etrating gaze is transparent; he allows men and women to look at us through his works, and even animals (suffice it to mention the "almost human" eyes of the skeletal white horse in his photograph *El testigo*) and things (mannequins or bones) can contain the horror experienced, as well as reserves of a poignant affirmation of life.

We think of the collection of insects made by a group of kidnapped women, or of the faces and voices in the video *Bocas de ceniza*, gestated when Echavarría heard on TV the song of an Atlantic-coast man thanking God for saving him from a massacre; not only didn't Echavarría rest until he found the singer, but he was driven by his voice to seek out similar songs, until he reached the Pacific, where he recorded another oral register of his country's history. In those graves transformed into popular altarpieces with paintings, flowers and sacred symbols and used to close the ritual of selecting one of war's unnamed victims to mark them as a chosen one, there is also—as the artist points out—"a coral exultation, a requiem that rises collectively, a way to negate oblivion."

Echavarría's photographs document over time the way in which "the people select those 'John Does' and give them a name in order to present them with petitions, to symbolically exhume them and give them some form of life back." This is to say, a form of religiosity in the midst of horror: while on the one hand miracles appear as the last refuge of hope, hope itself springs from a connection of solidarity with the dead. From compassion.

In *Réquiem NN*, Echavarría guides us towards an encounter with a naïve, primitivist aesthetic that, through floral offerings, the invention of names (such as "Jorge Luis," "Carlos Mauricio," or simply, "Mujer"), the adoption of affections (expressed by way of drawings of hearts and little flowers), and the confidence of requested and granted favors, transforms tragedy into a form of popular creativity. His role as a contemporary artist is not to generate but to note and highlight the immense visual poetry—and its life-restoring power—that for decades has grown on those graves, where we also find texts that play visually with space like constructivist poems: for example, by repeating the incantation: *chosen one* arranged horizontally and vertically. On the scratched-out NN acronym the name *archangel* is superimposed; and, by chance, the black text *do not erase* is reinforced with drippings.



Juan Manuel Echavarría. *Réquiem NN*, 2006. Lenticular prints.

The use of the lenticular technique through which Echavarría condenses two or three separate images in a single photograph of a tombstone enlarged to life-size scale, contains not only the symbolic allusion to each grave being all graves, and one John Doe every John Doe in the cemetery and the country, but also the possibility of recording temporal variations. In the seven journeys he has undertaken over the course of three years, Echavarría has been able to photograph what happens at several gravesites. Gratitude for favors granted after an "adoption," changes in ornamentation, and even abandonment and new appropriations, christenings, or the inclusion of family members, reflect not only visual events regarding the adopted dead, but the life of the townsfolk. "When I go to Puerto Berrio," Echavarría says, "I stay there for hours, days, and I meet the owners and listen to the favors they have received from the dead. I listen to their stories." He writes those stories in a diary, much of which we still don't know. *Réquiem NN* is an open project with a visual aesthetics emerged from the vast expanses of death, and he will continue to tell it "while war continues to rage in Colombia." Echavarría's lenticular photographs capable of recording the story of these gravesites argue once again for an art that achieves the meeting of the most terrible legacies of violence and the beauty of those collective gestures developed to confront and resist it. An antidote against the rivers of oblivion. A song to memory.

Adriana Herrera

Catalina Ortiz and Germán Gómez

Galería El Museo

This past October and November, Galería El Museo presented two exhibitions of the highest quality: *Condenados*, by Spanish artist Germán Gómez, and *Abecedario emocional*, by Catalina Ortiz, from Colombia. The former, winner of the *Revelación* award at FotoEspaña 2008, uses color photography as his support, but breaks—and we must assume this word literally—with "the promise of the frame," to use a beautiful expression coined by my colleague Pablo Acosta. We often encounter photographs that circumscribe themselves to the boundaries of the frame; it is so obvious, we don't even notice. However, whenever photography breaks through those boundaries, when it crosses them, it acquires a different materiality, one I have called *photogenesis*. Photogenia turns the photograph's subject and object into a specular space where reflections generate new places, new forms, new identities.

In Gómez's work we see how form is disarticulated, broken, fragmented, only to be reconstituted and reshaped. His *condenados* are an exploration of the nude body, of his own body at times mixing promiscuously with others, as if attempting to form a different identity. These portraits present us with a different way to approach the issue of identity. In psychoanalysis, identity is formed through the mirror stage. In this case, the mirror has shattered to pieces. The artist must recompose the image, joining the fragments like pieces of a puzzle. The result is an image

where seams, tears, rips are on display, like carefully sewn wounds.

The nude body appears to float in a deep emptiness, as if that were the only possible place for the condemned after Judgment Day. There emerges here an important reference in the history of art: Michelangelo and his marble "slaves" for Jules II's funerary monument and the fragment of the Judgment at the Sistine Chapel, which undoubtedly inspired Gómez during his time at the Spanish Academy in Rome. Michelangelo's bodies are always contorted, perennially suffering as a result of the struggle between the fleeting flesh and the immortal soul. Germán Gómez's photogenic bodies, as in *Condenado II*, are certainly connected to Michelangelo's condemned ones, still muscular bodies clawed at by demons and taken to the underworld. Gómez insists, masterfully, on the fact that the condemned are all of us mortals, who remain, in essence, flesh.

This reference is reinforced at the formal level: those of us who know firsthand Michelangelo's fresco, can corroborate that the figure's outlines come together gradually, allowing us to discern the boundaries. Gómez's goes further, making these boundaries—these tears in the photographic paper—obvious and conjoining them with the form, creating a surface where the thread and cuts produce a new image.

The work of Catalina Ortiz tends to exalt drawing and collage within a conceptual

framework. It is truly comforting to encounter works of this kind, impeccably realized with outstanding technique and complex conceptual content that turn each one of them into a complex visual pace: for instance, *Utopía*, where we see a character turning away from the lens, photographing in turn a photographic image that opens in front of him as if it were a painting. The photographic image in question reveals a wooden, two-story house; in one of the second-story windows there is a sign of the kind used to advertise a building's sale, reading *Utopía*.

This enigmatic image surely generates in the viewer questions that, far from being immediately answerable, open up avenues for reflection. This reflection, of course, takes place away from our understanding. The meaning of the work seems to be anchored on its lower section, where we read the following hand-written sentence: "Everything looks better from a distance. Because real people speak, have opinions, feel." Indeed, Ortiz's works insist on reality and on what is built on it by images and words.

In these small-format works, images, words, and objects such as threads create a hyper-real atmosphere that interrogates reality. In *Aferrado/Aterrado* we find a character who, sitting at the edge of a precipice, looks down with a certain apprehension; once again in the lower section Ortiz writes: "Fear is a habit and it is not only learned

(it is also taught)." Speaking about her method, the artist says: "Initially I collect images from magazines, advertisements, scientific articles, on-line encyclopedias, and photography books. Then I allow a new image to emerge on the basis of the interaction between those other ones, and finally the process ends with the renaming of the new image based on an emotional concept ('I,' 'Transition,' 'Domination,' 'Terrified'...) that is complemented with a sentence that questions its conventional meaning. In this way I try to relativize the viewer's canons so as to have them open up their senses and reformulate the way in which they relate to what's around them."

In this renaming of the image with different words, the artist insists on what we are seeing, unafraid of non-evidence and not attempting to dilute the relationship between words and images, as ancient as Horace's famous dictum *Ut pictura poesis*: as is painting, so is poetry; as is poetry, so is painting.

In sum, these two exhibitions offered two contemporary perspectives and reminded us that contemporariness is not determined by a given technique, but by an attitude towards time and the world around us.

Ricardo Arcos-Palma

Icaro Zorbar

Galería Casas Riegner

The most recent exhibition of works by Icaro Zorbar at Bogotá's Casas Riegner Gallery confirms that the linking of technology to the contemporary is not always felicitous. Rather on the contrary, for Zorbar technological problems as such are not the concern, but the humanization of technology is. The aesthetic value of his machines, which he dubs "small monsters," is anchored on their simplicity and their evident resemblance of toys. Moreover, the visual paradigm they represent moves between work of art, machine, and game. Zorbar's intelligent, constructive, and positive work insists on the resilience of life on the face of an incessant technological frenzy that erodes our enjoyment of the simple things.

Estuvimos ahí, which opened in November, 2009, comprises seven difficult-to-define works that revalue, among other things, romance, with suggestive titles like *Víspera* or *Canción para un amor imposible*. They function as twin proposals, as they share

Catalina Ortiz. *Utopía*, 2009. Drawing and collage on paper. 16 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (42 x 29,7 cm.).



Germán Gómez. *Condenado II*, 2009. C-print on encapsulated paper and thread. 70 1/2 x 39 1/2 in. 80 x 100 cm.

