

José Roca on Óscar Muñoz

Imprints for a Fleeting Memorial

This text is taken from a public presentation at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia in July of 2007

Over the last three decades Colombian artist Óscar Muñoz has developed an important body of work exploring the status of the image in relation to memory. Regarded as one of the most significant contemporary visual artists in his native country, his work has also captivated audiences in the international scene. Muñoz's oeuvre defies media characterization, moving freely between and among photography, printmaking, drawing, installation, video and sculpture, effectively blurring the boundaries between these practices through his use of innovative and unprecedented processes.

Óscar Muñoz began his studies in the 1970s in Cali where there was an intense and multidisciplinary cultural movement that included writers, photographers, filmmakers and visual artists. Many of Muñoz's peers, such as Carlos Mayolo, Luis Ospina, Fernell Franco and Andrés Caicedo, are considered to be pioneers in their respective fields, and formed the context of his formative years. In that stage, Muñoz executed large-scale graphite drawings in which he made visible the sordid atmosphere of tenement houses, and their dwellers, through works of deep psychological overtones. Muñoz' work has retained some characteristics that have remained constant in his later work: his involvement in social issues; his technical mastery in handling materials; the use of photography as a tool for fixing memory; and an ongoing investigation of the dramatic possibilities of light and shadow in the rendering of an image. In Muñoz's work the phenomenological approach of Minimalism—with its emphasis on the relationship between the work, the audience, and the space that contains both—converges with the “inquisitive” character of engaged art, which was the context in which he grew up.

In the mid-eighties Muñoz distanced himself from traditional methods like drawing with charcoal on paper and started to experiment with innovative processes and unprecedented supports. This departure point can be located in his series *Cortinas de Baño*

(*Shower Curtains*), translucent plastic curtains painted with an airbrush and installed in the space suggesting the presence of human beings behind the supports. However, it is in the 1990s that his work starts to question drawing, printmaking and photography through radically innovative approaches. He also addresses the relationship between the piece and the space where it is installed, and the role of the observer as well as that of the passing of time in the process of constructing an image.



Cortinas de baño, 1985- 1986
Acrylic on plastic

The artist's decision to abandon traditional formats and techniques while still using their primary sources and mechanisms to investigate the ephemeral has resulted in a work that is as much grounded in the intrinsic qualities of the materials employed as in the poetic associations they embody. The transcendent use of fundamental elements (water, air and fire) in various processes testifies to the inner tensions found in the circumstantial manifestations and cycles of human life.

Theories regarding how human memory works note that we tend to remember the first and last elements in any succession of words, images or events, so the elements in the middle—which sometimes can be understood

as the *process*—tend to be less remembered. In Óscar Muñoz’ work, one can identify the will to extend the constituting moment of the early image in such a way that that very image—which would correspond to what is easily remembered—is constantly delayed and often undefined, becoming integrated, many times, with the final image without boundaries or seams. This extension of the threshold of initial perception evokes an effect of continuity in the memory, refusing the possibility of a unique and defined image in favour of an “expanded memory” in which the image is in a constant process of definition. Instability in Muñoz’ work is related more to the ways in which memory itself works, than with the mnemonic devices that humankind has invented in its futile attempts to fix it. Monuments and memorials, whose task is to fix memory and thus become instruments to commemorate the event in the future, are usually so dependent on the historical context that they gradually lose their ability to embody what they commemorate, ending up being little more than mute buildings, unable to communicate anything beyond their own materiality. The ephemeral and unstable image of Muñoz’ works, always oscillating between presence and absence, is paradoxically more efficient as a memorial or a monument, since it addresses poetically the ephemeral nature of human existence, memory and history. His work transcends the specific anecdote, as well as the particular and defined historical fact, to allude to the human condition and the ephemerality and fugacity of life itself, to an immemorial memory that harks back to the origins of time.

Narcissi

The *Narcissi* are the result of charcoal dust sifted through a photo-serigraphic screen (which has been prepared with a photographic self-portrait of the artist) onto the surface of a container full of water. The image floats on the surface, suspended precariously in an imminent process of change and destruction. While the



Narcissi, 1991 (2007)
Screen- print on water, plexiglass

water evaporates, the continuously distorting image descends and adheres to the bottom of the container, finally losing its vulnerability and mutable character. The viewer is aware of looking at an image that is not fixed nor entirely finished, but rather in the process of becoming, and that, paradoxically, will only be fully finished when it lays, dry and distorted, at the bottom of the container.

The resulting images, exhibited under the name *Narcisos Secos (Dried Narcissus)*, are at the same time the final image and the death of the process.

The artist has stated:

“These three moments in the process of *Narcissus*—when the dust touches the water and is turned into an image; the process and changes it undergoes during evaporation; and when the dust finally adheres to the bottom—allude to three definite moments: creation, life and death”



Biografías. DVD Installation view, 2005. Newspapers in Colombia present an endless flow of images where one violent event replaces the previous one, banalizing tragedy and escalating the viewer’s resistance to crude images, much in the way a vaccine works.

Aliento

Aliento (Breath) is a series of portraits, made in photo-serigraphy on metallic mirrors, placed at the observers’ height. The portraits’ impressions (images of people who died in different circumstances published in newspapers’ obituaries) are revealed when the observer, after having recognized himself, breathes on each circular mirror. In this ephemeral instant, the reflected image disappears, revealing the fleeting image of someone already disappeared, who returns thanks to the breath of life of one who no longer can be termed “the viewer”.

“War and photography now seem inseparable... A society that imposes as a rule the aspiration of never experiencing deprivations, failures, anguishes, pain, panic, and where death itself is seen not as natural and inevitable, but as a cruel and undeserved calamity, creates a huge curiosity regarding these events, and

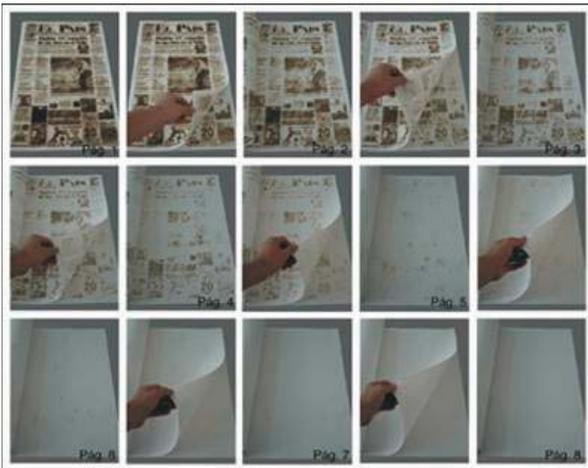


Alien to (Breath), 1995
Mirrors, screen- printed with grease

photography partly satisfies that curiosity. The feeling of being aside from calamity encourages the interest to contemplate painful images, and that contemplation suggests and strengthens the feeling of being safe from danger. Partly because we are 'here' and not 'there,' partly because of the inevitable character any event acquires when it is transmuted into images." (Susan Sontag)

Intervals—while I breathe

The tautological series *Intervals—while I breathe* consists of six self-portraits of the artist smoking, done by Muñoz using a cigarette to “draw” as he smoked it. In the act of living, we are dying little by little; breathing a smoke we know is killing us is a way to be aware of this process. Inhaling the smoke kindles the fire that will be used to constitute the image, while it adds some death to the body that inhales it. This work reflects a flow from body to hand, from hand to image, and from image to body back again, in a beautiful and terrible metaphor of the short interval between life and death.



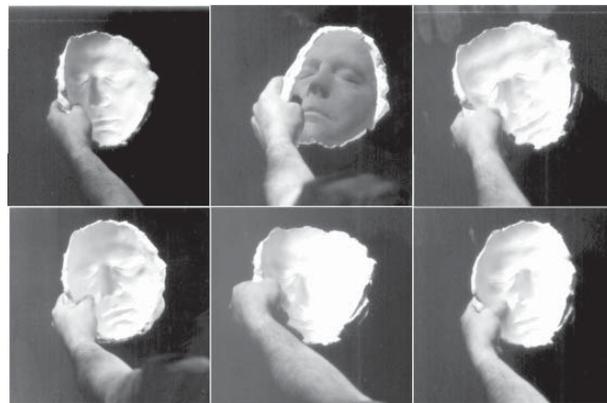
Paistiempo, 2007
Newspaper inscribed with burning tool

Palimpsest

In his seminar about the gaze, Jacques Lacan proposes a sketch in which he superposes for the traditional cone of perspective vision known since the Renaissance (where the subject’s perspective is located in the apex), a symmetrically inverted cone. Lacan suggests that, when looking, the subject is being looked at by the object, in what he calls the Gaze. This sketch has been analyzed by Hal Foster, in *The Return of the Real*, who notes: “seen when seeing, represented when representing, the Lacanian subject is fixed in a double position...”

In Lacan’s sketch, the observed subject, sees, and what it sees is me. In *Palimpsest*, Muñoz doubles the sketch, which results in a multiple crossings of the gaze: I see me, I see me seeing, I see you, I see you seeing, I see you seeing me, I see me seeing you, *etcetera*.

As in the metaphor of the river, always the same, always different, time presents us a mirrored image that is forever changing: each time we look our face in the mirror, it gives us back a different image. Furthermore, it gives us back a face in which simultaneously the image we *see* and the one that we have of ourselves projected on it coexist. As Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida*: “What I want, in short, is that my image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) ‘self’; but it is the contrary that must be said: ‘myself’ never coincides with my image...”



The cyclop's gaze, 2001
Digital print

The Cyclop's gaze

The *Cyclops' gaze* is a photographic series that imposes a perceptual game between opposites: positive/negative, full/empty, presence/absence, reality/delusion, etc. A game mediated by a single eyesight, that of the camera. The series presents a plaster mask in negative, a void, directly copied from the artist’s face, as was customarily done in ancient Rome. The *Imagines* of ancient Rome are the exact equivalent of the social

role of some current photographic portraits. They have an important duty in the work of mourning: to accept a reality while getting used to the unreality of its images. “In those societies in which the professionals of death and consolation have lost their power, when the disappearance of one of its members no longer mobilizes the entire social body in collective organized mourning behaviors immediately perceptible of solidarity, the most individualized conducts take relevance. I will not say, of course, that one photo is enough for the ‘libido detachment.’ However, it plays its role by allowing the mourner ‘to live from now on in memory;’ the only way to rationalize death is to continue living.” (Pierre Bourdieu)

Re/trato (Self-portrait)

Re/trato (Self-portrait), as its name suggests, is a reflection about (self) portraiture, but also about constancy and attempt. The video shows us an image that is being constructed incessantly, without a beginning or an end. However, the medium used (water) and the support (a concrete slab in plain sunlight) conspire against the stability of this precarious face. The image starts to disappear in the moment it is being made. The drawing replicates the identity lines of a face in a futile attempt to define it, to fix it once and for all, but the ephemeral image persists in disappearing. As in the myth of Sisyphus, the hand does an effort while knowing that the result of will unavoidably be lost, which means always going back to the departure point in a double act of frustration and tenacity. As seen in his first series, Óscar Muñoz invokes the myth of Narcissus, who died while trying to reach his own image reflected in the water, and I would like to think that there is a bridge between this and Sisyphus, both condemned to the attempt to achieve something beyond their reach. However, punishment can be relativized. Albert Camus notes how Sisyphus’ triumph lies in the acknowledgement of his impossible and eternal task—“The clairvoyance that should have constituted his torment, simultaneously consummates his victory”—



Re/trato (Self-portrait), 2007
Video detail



Re/trato (Self-portrait), 2007
Video installation view

because the uncertainty that feeds hope disappears, and with it the possibility for unhappiness: “Overwhelming truths die when they are acknowledged.” It is in the acceptance of its imprisoned reality that Narcissism validates its ecstatic and self-contemplative category. Narcissus/Sisyphus, *Narcisyphus*, restates the myth and perseveres in the attempt, knowing that the achievement of its goal is an impossible task.

by José Roca, 2007

On Óscar Muñoz

Popayán, Colombia, b. 1951

Óscar Muñoz lives and works in Cali, Colombia. His work has recently entered the collections of the Tate Modern, L.A. MOCA, the Miami Art Museum, the Hirshhorn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and La Caixa in Barcelona, among others; in 2007 he represented Columbia at the Venice Biennale.

Acknowledgments

Imprints for a Fleeting Memorial, is a touring exhibition organized by Colombian curator José Roca. He includes 11 other recent and early works to make a concise survey of Muñoz’s art. It is organized by Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Toronto. Scott McLeod, Director.

Curated by José Roca. Assistant Curator: María Claudia García.

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