

## **Doris Salcedo. *Palimpsesto***



Doris Salcedo, Palimpsesto, 2013-2017  
Crédito fotográfico: Juan Fernando Castro

<b>DATES:</b>	October 6, 2017 – April1, 2018
<b>PLACE:</b>	Palacio de Cristal. Parque del Retiro
<b>ORGANIZATION:</b>	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
<b>COORDINACIÓN:</b>	Soledad Liaño and Suset Sánchez
<b>REALATED ACTIVITIES:</b>	Encounter with Doris Salcedo. In conversation with Estrella de Diego October 6, 2017 - 7:00 p.m. / Nouvel Building, Auditorium 200

*Palimpsest* is a site-specific project for the Palacio de Cristal in Parque del Retiro by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (Bogotá, 1958). On the basis of an expanded concept of sculpture and rigorous experiential investigation, this artist's career has led to the development of a complex and multifaceted oeuvre centered on political violence and the suffering of those excluded from dignified living conditions.

Salcedo's objective is to help to (re)construct the incomplete and fragmentary history of those who inhabit on life's periphery. The artist, who often describes herself as a sculptress at the service of victims, conceives her work as a funeral oration with which she tries to establish the principles of a "poetics of mourning". She does so from the premise that only through mourning, which she considers the most human action there is, can victims be given back the dignity and humanity that were snatched away from them.

At various points in her career, Doris Salcedo has turned her attention to violent situations and processes associated with different geopolitical contexts. This is illustrated by such seminal projects as *Atrabiliarios* (Haunting, 1992-2004), where the memory of those who have disappeared is evoked by the everyday objects that belonged to them. Illustrative too are her sculptural series of disturbing beauty, such as *La casa viuda* (The Widowed House, 1993-1995) and *Unland* (1995-1998), and performative installations like *Noviembre 6 y 7* (November 6 and 7, 2012) or the recent *Sumando ausencias* (Adding Absences, 2016), the collective Act of Mourning she organized in Bogotá's Plaza Bolívar a few days after the victory of the 'no' vote in the referendum to ratify the peace agreement reached with the FARC by the government of Juan Manuel Santos.

*Palimpsest* belongs to this specific facet of her work. This installation covers the entire surface of the Palacio de Cristal, a building constructed in the late 19th century for the Exhibition of the Philippine Islands, and therefore directly linked to Spain's colonial history. Emerging from the floor are drops of water that slowly join in order to make the names of hundreds of men and women, all people who have been drowned while trying to reach Europe in search of a better life. In this way, the Colombian artist brings visibility to one of the most dramatic and ignominious events of our recent history: the deaths of thousands of people in the waters of the Mediterranean before the indifference, if not (un)conscious complicity, of an anesthetized European society drifting dangerously towards enclosure within its own identity.

The installation is a paradigmatic example both of Doris Salcedo's characteristic *modus operandi* – her projects tend to be long-term affairs that demand a complex and minute process of conceptualization, investigation and execution – and of her determination to "present violence without violence" by making pain perceptible without having to show it explicitly. In this respect, it is worth recalling that like Paul Celan, a poet whom she has always greatly admired, Salcedo starts from the conviction that only poetic language can help us unravel the (un)reason for violence. That is why she has decided to confront horror, and confront us with it, through almost abstract textures, since although she accepts that she cannot change the course of events – "art", she says,

“cannot save a single life” – she does believe that it makes it possible for the viewer to establish an affective relationship with those who have suffered, helping in this way to prevent their experience from being consigned to oblivion.

Two recent installations by Salcedo, whose art may be situated within the growing tendency pointed out by Rosalind Krauss toward an expansion of sculpture's field of possibilities, provide very good examples of this strategy. One is *Plegaria Muda* (Silent Prayer), with inverted and dysfunctional tables from which small blades of grass are seen sprouting. This work sprang from a lengthy process of reflection and investigation on the unstoppable spiral of mimetic violence which underlies fratricidal conflicts. The other is *Shibboleth*, her celebrated intervention of 2007 in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, where she opened an enormous crack meant to evoke the breach between the First and the Third Worlds, which still takes countless different forms that are often hard to recognize. In a way, these two projects could be seen as direct antecedents of the installation Salcedo now presents at the Palacio de Cristal. All three are conceptual works where materiality acquires a symbolic dimension, but at the same time are perceived by the spectator in a profoundly sensorial way that establishes a highly physical and almost bodily relationship with them.

The objective of Doris Salcedo, an artist who can be linked with certain critical practices of environmental art, is that *Palimpsest* should function as a kind of counter-memorial by opposition with those privileged commemorative sites which exalt national, racial or religious identity. It is meant to be a vacuum, an artwork that is nearly invisible and silent. Its nature is changing and evanescent, for the appearing and disappearing names, sometimes barely legible, become symbols making us aware that behind them, and behind each of those news items on shipwrecks that we see every day in the media, there are specific lives that have been cut short forever.

Unlike other commemorative constructions, like the one at Ground Zero in Manhattan or that dedicated to the Vietnam War veterans in Washington, *Palimpsest* exceeds and surpasses the notion of identity. In this respect, it helps to honor and preserve the memory of victims to whom society owes an undeniable debt, but without resorting to national narratives or other established constructed identities. Instead, it vindicates each life for what it is in itself.

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