

19.mar.98—31.may.98

Unland/
Doris Salcedo

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Organized by Dan Cameron

Doris Salcedo, born in 1958 in Bogota, Colombia, is a leading member of a new generation of artists who have achieved international acclaim during the past five years, partly as a result of their choosing to live and work in their countries of birth. Notably for artists from such countries as Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela, the once-obligatory step of emigrating in order to further one's career is being supplanted by the international art community's recognition that the validity of art made outside world art centers can be determined by conditions under which it is produced. Artists like Salcedo frequently travel abroad to participate in exhibitions and keep abreast of developments in the field, but their work achieves contextual resonance from the place they choose to call home.

For Salcedo, the primacy of one's home is reflected in her choice of title for her first solo exhibition in a U.S. museum. Inspired by Paul Celan's poetry but not borrowed from it, *Unland* neither exists as a word in the English language nor as a transposition from Spanish. It is an invented term, possibly referring to the land that one has come from, but with ominous overtones that suggest a land that has been taken away. Were one to use it as a verb — *to unland* — the reference would clearly be the act of forcibly driving somebody off his or her territory.

In Colombia, where Salcedo lives and works, the incidence of violent death has risen over the past fifty years to the point where it has become the primary threat to the social fabric. Although this violence does not discriminate between urban and rural victims, its most devastating effects can be witnessed in the less-developed regions where Salcedo has traveled on a regular basis during the past decade. Seeking out and interviewing the survivors of violence, the artist is completely absorbed in acting as a "secondary witness" to the event, to the point where it becomes impossible for her to even try to revisit or reconstruct the original traumatic act for us. As she explains:

I have come to meet people that have had the generosity of sharing with me their pain. Pain is constantly being revived. I think that allows for the establishment of another type of relation with reality. The distance between them and me disappears, allowing their pain to take over me, to take over my center. If I manage to make a good piece that circulates in the center of society, then their pain will enter into the core of this society. The victims will become the main protagonists.¹

Like much of Salcedo's work of the recent past, *Unland* incorporates elements of architecture and domestic life that are indirectly connected to the individuals whose stories she has committed to heart. By creating the semblance of shelter, the artist constructs a site where the careful addition of personal effects and/or human and animal fragments signals the transformation of ordinary materials into an intimate encounter with the reconstructed memory of loss. In his catalogue essay for this exhibition, Charles Merewether details the effect of such encounters in Salcedo's work of the early 1990s:

Plates, clothing, buttons, zippers and bones are grafted, compressed, and compacted into the surfaces of pieces of furniture. Chairs are covered by a fine skin of lace as if seared into the wood, bones are embedded into the side of a cabinet, a spoon forced between the seams of wood of a kitchen bureau. We may say the furniture appears wounded, both physically and psychically.²

Although considerably more subdued than the works in this description, the individual pieces in *Unland* are no less emotive in their presentation of a visual mystery which the viewer is then invited to gradually unravel. Fragile in the extreme and nearly impossible to fabricate, the sculptures are also absurdly

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Unland

irreversible witness, 1995—98, wood, cloth, metal and hair. 44" x 98" x 35". Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York



simple in their underlying illusion of a table which appears as if it has taken possession of a human life, sprouting thick effulgences of hair and a thin covering of raw silk in its over-identification with the memory of the lost loved one. The key to this transition within Salcedo's work is that she is no longer rendering the object in the form of a crypt or funerary receptacle, but rather as an inanimate thing where a wayward life force has unexpectedly taken refuge.

Two of the *Unland* sculptures point to different perspectives on this anthropomorphic metaphor. The first work in the series, *the orphan's tunic* (1997), is a long wooden table divided into three roughly equivalent visual zones: one is unadorned, another bears a white shroud of raw silk, and a third is an intermediate zone which the viewer only gradually recognizes as covered with human hair. Although it is very difficult to imagine any other way of realizing this work, steady examination is necessary to detect the existence of the thousands of miniscule holes drilled through the table, permitting each hair to pass individually through the body of the table with the physical integrity of both intact. Together these thousands of hairs cover the surface in a profusion, conjuring up feelings of the uncanny, while thousands more protrude into the open air or bind the silk shroud to the table in an unimaginably delicate web of stitchery.

In the second work, *irreversible witness* (1995–98), the movement of hair across the width of the table (rather than its length) and the sewing of the hair both above and below the fabric lend the entire structure a ghostly tan and gray color, as well as a slight luminescence caused by the passing of one surface over another. A child's metal crib, which has been covered in an even more intricate hair and silk shroud whose color and texture suggest the oxidation of metal, appears to be emerging from (or being absorbed into) one end of the table. This truncated gesture is a metaphor for the absent violence in the narrative and contrasts dramatically with the cracks and blemishes of the wood surface, which are transformed by the artist into a compelling, gauze-like wound.

Functioning as both containers and sites, these works act out a memory-driven process uniquely absent in Colombian society, where the pervasiveness of violence is so extreme that it has produced a unique absence of a shared belief in commemoration. As viewers of Salcedo's work, we are not expected to join in mourning someone we do not know, nor to become deeply engrossed by the specifics of loss; but we are able to detect evidence of trauma in our recognition that regular channels of communication are blocked and representations of the original event have been lost forever to the vagaries of memory. Thirdhand witnesses to the original victim's inability to speak, we watch as the human spirit takes refuge from its terror in the distant memory of an unimpeded life.

If we are to take Salcedo's ideas to another level, *Unland* also expresses the artist's recognition that the ongoing displacement of individuals, families, and entire communities is rooted in deep social inequalities. For each person killed there is someone else who does the killing, and at least one third person whose

life is also torn asunder. Multiplied into the thousands, this ongoing devaluation of human life underscores the lack of adequate social rituals, in Colombia and elsewhere, for addressing the depth of this collective tragedy. Experienced from this perspective, the modesty and unassuming character of Salcedo's work and its refusal to draw explicit attention to itself are a direct outcome of her response to the extraordinary dignity of these individuals, who have been forced to withstand unimaginable loss without the benefit of any social legitimacy attached to their suffering.

As the combined tragedies of this century indicate all too clearly, the act of remembering that which cannot be reconciled to one's present may not alleviate any immediate suffering, but it can enable others to learn from example. As a site where loss is enacted, Salcedo's work does not provide a template for suffering, but rather suggests that the act of memory is all the more powerful a weapon when placed at the disposal of those who have little else. In a sense, those thousands of hairs in the orphan's tunic recall the amazing feats of delicate flowers that push their way through rock, cement, or the most unyielding soil because their urge to live is greater than the forces holding them back. On the one hand, *Unland* opens the door to a terrible form of beauty; on the other it helps pave the way toward our coming to terms with those millions of humble individuals who confront the unendurable every day of their lives, and miraculously prevail.

Dan Cameron, *Senior Curator*

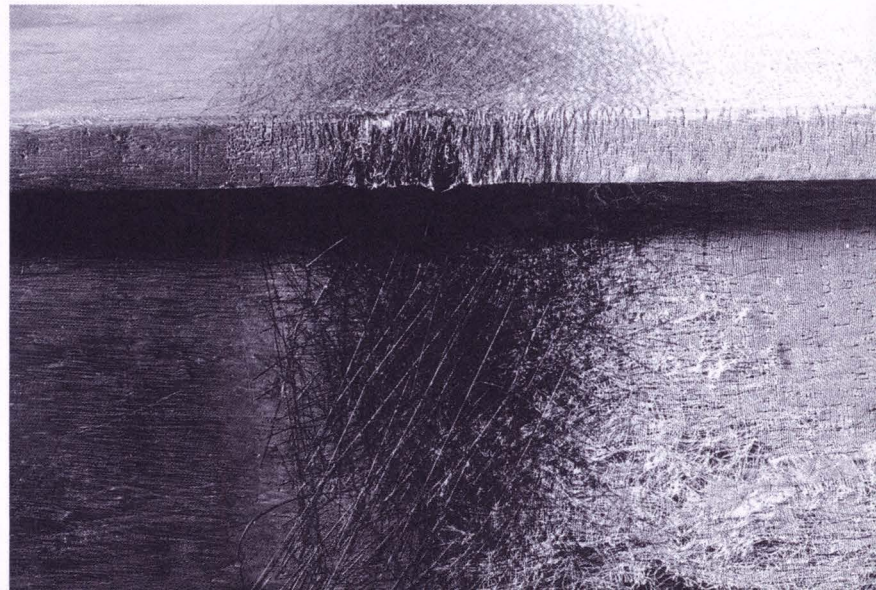
¹ Quoted in Charles Merewether, "To Bear Witness," *Doris Salcedo* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998) p.20

² Merewether, "To Bear Witness," p. 20–21

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Unland

the orphan's tunic (detail), 1997, wood, cloth and hair. 31.5" x 96.5" x 38.5". Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York. (Detail on cover)



Video Copenhagen

19.mar.98—31.may.98

Mezzanine Gallery

Recent work by Joachim Hamou, Simone Aaberg Kærn, Peter Land, Superflex, Gitte Villesen

Organized by Dan Cameron, Coordinated by Lars Bang Larsen

The recent work of seven young Danish artists, three of whom make up the collaborative team known as Superflex, provide a diverse sampling of new video tendencies in Copenhagen. Working in personal styles derived from tabloid and documentary filmmaking, *cinema verité* and television, the artists in *Video Copenhagen* explore a range of topics. Joachim Hamou juggles media conventions in a way that often makes it difficult to distinguish the real thing from the spoof, while Peter Land's humorous exercises in futility slyly refer to experimental video motifs from the 1970s. In contrast, Simone Aaberg Kærn's straightforward tribute to female fighter pilots uses fast, rhythmic edits to replicate the experience of defying gravity, while Superflex's video narrative documents the team's recent installation of a biogas system in a Zimbabwean village from both the artists' and the villagers' perspectives. In Gitte Villesen's psychobiographies, people the artist knows become the subjects of amusing and highly personal encounters.

Nothing Endures – John Salvest

19.mar.98—31.may.98

Mezzanine Stairwell

Organized by Dan Cameron

In this work made from 4096 business cards collected over the past few years, U.S. artist John Salvest takes on a subject with which everyone can identify: immortality. Based on the premise that one gives out a business card in order to be remembered, the work is a mosaic from which the words of the title clearly emerge. Commenting about another of his works, Salvest addresses the human endeavor implied by his choice of materials:

Like fingerprints, no two business cards are alike. Earnestly reflected in these cards are the worldly accomplishments and aspirations of those they represent. In them one can find the facts of our existence: name, occupation, title, address, phone-fax-e-mail, nickname, motto, logo, etc. In them one can read the details of our busy lives... And in their color, texture, type style and layout one can even find a record of our far-ranging aesthetic sensibilities. Given the same standard format, each card somehow becomes a unique, pocket-sized self-portrait.¹

The work is both an ironic reminder of the certainty of death in spite of all our efforts and a bittersweet celebration of the human desire to endure.

¹ Meditation 7.21 by John Salvest. Exhibition Brochure, Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis, 1997

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John Salvest, *Nothing Endures*, business cards



Hours

Mon closed
Tue closed
Wed 12.noon—6.pm
Thu 12.noon—8.pm Free 6.pm—8.pm
Fri 12.noon—8.pm
Sat 12.noon—8.pm
Sun 12.noon—6.pm

Admission

\$5 general; \$3 artists, students, seniors. Free for members and visitors 18 and under.

Directions

Subway 6 to Spring Street or Bleecker Street; N, R to Prince Street; A, C, E to Spring Street; B, D, F, Q to Broadway / Lafayette Street.
Bus 1, 5, 6, 21 to Houston Street or Broadway.

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Catalogue

Designed by Abbott Miller, *Unland/Doris Salcedo* features essays by Dan Cameron and Charles Merewether and an introduction by Marcia Tucker. 80 pp., 29 illus., 27 in color. Available at the New Museum Bookstore.

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design Jason Ring

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