

Review: Doris Salcedo's Forceful Political Art in Guggenheim Retrospective



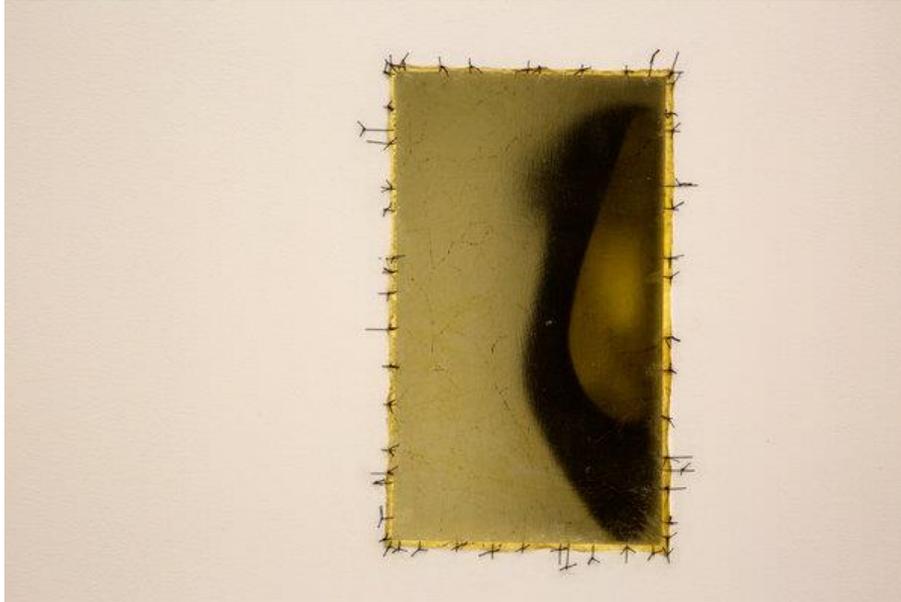
The idea for "Plegaria Muda," which includes blades of grass rising through wooden tables, came after Doris Salcedo spent time in Los Angeles with women who had lost children to gang wars. Credit Ruth Fremson/*The New York Times*

Politically speaking, you don't have to be a house to be haunted. All you need to be is someone who keeps an eye on the news; who pays attention to loss through violence; and feels a personal stake in that loss, as if it were happening to people you know and care about, to people who live in your home.

The artist Doris Salcedo was born in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1958, and came of age during an era when civic murder was a way of life in her country and others in Latin America. Governments ruthlessly cut down opposition; the opposition retaliated in kind. Drug wars took out whatever lives got in their path. Entire villages ended up in mass graves. Men and women out for a walk disappeared, evaporated, leaving questions about their fate and a memory of their existence behind like unclaimed luggage.

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For some 30 years, Ms. Salcedo, who still lives in Bogotá, has made such memories the essence of a witnessing art. Some of it has been specifically commemorative. When the Colombian journalist and peace activist Jaime Garzon was assassinated in 1999, she filled Bogotá's main plaza with tens of thousands of votive candles and laid down a two-mile-long path of red roses in the streets.



“Atrabiliarios” (“Defiant Ones”) is in a career retrospective of the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, at the Guggenheim. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Other public work has been symbolically more abstract. In 2003, in Istanbul, she filled a vacant lot in a crumbling ghetto that had once housed Greek and Jewish minorities with a three-story pile of empty chairs. In 2007, in London, she cut a deep, jagged 500-foot-long crack in the floor of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, a seismic fault line through the center of mainstream art history, and a reminder of what that history has suppressed.

Her memorializing impulse has also produced the dozens of austere but viscerally animated sculptures and installations that fill all four floors of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's Tower Level galleries in a career retrospective opening on Friday, called simply “Doris Salcedo,” originally organized for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago by Madeleine Grynstejn and Julie Rodrigues Widholm and expertly shaped for the Guggenheim by Katherine Brinson.

I've complained about exhibitions consigned to these galleries that I thought should have appeared center stage, in the museum's spiraling rotunda. But for physical reasons alone, this survey is exactly where it should be. At least two of its spread-out installations, “Unland” (1995-98) and “Plegaria Muda” (2008-10), would not have worked on the rotunda's curved, sloping ramps. Another, “Atrabiliarios” (1992-2004), all but requires enclosure, which the rotunda's open bays don't offer. And individual sculptures gain in expressive power from being in galleries, which, depending on the art, take on the character of attics, hospital wards and tombs.

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Concrete poured onto chairs. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



Stacks of plain white cotton men's shirts in "Untitled," a response to death-squad killings. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Ms. Salcedo's art is most effective when it can control space and generate atmosphere that has roots in hard news. One of the earliest installations here, "Untitled" from 1989, was a response to death-squad killings of banana plantation laborers in northern Colombia a year earlier. Yet nothing in the piece directly refers to those events. Its primary components — stacks of plain white cotton men's shirts, stiffened with plaster and pierced through the right side by steel uprights, as if nailed to the ground — are harsh metaphors for martyrdom, with both local and universal application.

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Clothing embedded in concrete. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

“Atrabiliarios” (which Ms. Salcedo roughly translates as “Defiant Ones”) operates in a similar way. It’s the product of years of research that Ms. Salcedo did on the history of “disappeared” women in Colombia, but it includes neither names nor statistics. Instead, it’s made up of secondhand personal objects — shoes, mostly high heels — treated like relics. The artist has inserted them, singly or in pairs, into niches carved from the gallery wall, then sealed the niches with sheets of translucent animal fiber. Startlingly and puzzlingly, she has sutured the sheets onto — and into — the wall with thick, black surgical thread, in a labor-intensive process that registers as at once reverent and savage.



Untitled works from 1986 and 1987. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

What results is a forceful political art, best described as empathetic rather than didactic in its method, and stylistically closer to Minimalism than to broadsides. These features are especially clear in a group of sculptures Ms. Salcedo made from used furniture in the 1990s. During that decade, Colombia was in chaos. Leftist rebels and right-wing militia

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battled for the drug market. Homicide and kidnapping were epidemic. High-level politicians and street-level citizens were under equal threat. Anyone could end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the wrong place was everywhere, including the home, that traditional refuge from the world. That's where Ms. Salcedo located that place in her sculptures, turning the domestic sphere from a sanctuary into a danger zone of crashing forms and crushing weights.



"Thou-less" (2001-02). Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Once again, she did this by rethinking and repositioning ordinary things. She took doors off hinges and nailed them to walls. She broke down furniture and reconstructed it in crazy ways, so that beds stabbed into bookcases and dressers melded with armoires as if surgically joined. No space was left empty: Shelves and drawers were filled with poured concrete; chairs were piled high with it. The really freakish changes, though, were in details: slivers of bone embedded in wood, zippers implanted in corners; tufts of hair sprouting from joints.



A detail from "Unland," which includes human hair. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Finally, there were ghosts, remnants of lives past, in the form of bits of clothing, some of it given to the artist by the relatives of people who had vanished or died. A trace of flannel nightwear peeks out from a concrete slab. A swatch of linen, membrane-fine and embroidered with flowers, swims into view behind a cabinet window.

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"A Flor de Piel," with rose petals and thread. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Certain more recent work, although vigilant to evil, sounds something like notes of hope. The 2014 "A Flor de Piel" ("Skin Deep"), made in tribute to a Colombian nurse who had been tortured and killed, is like nothing else: a carpet-size mantle, or shroud, or flayed skin, sewn entirely from rose petals. The idea for "Plegaria Muda" ("Silent Prayer") came after Ms. Salcedo spent time in Los Angeles with women who had lost children to gang wars. The installation is made from dozens of paired wooden tables, one laid on top of the other, with a layer of earth sandwiched between. From pinpoint holes drilled in the uppermost table, which lies on its back, blades of fresh grass rise.

Whether you see the grass-growing tables as a gardens or a graves may depend on your frame of mind, which may depend on the news you've been reading. Either way, the piece has a slow-acting beauty, as much by this artist does, which doesn't necessarily mean it's a natural fit for New York at present. The mainstream art world here is riding high on money and self-satisfaction. Global politics doesn't interest us much. We want art to be about pleasure, and resent it when it's not.

There's also the fact that some of Ms. Salcedo's strongest art has been site-specific. Although there are no examples locally, you can gain an excellent sense of her track record with it in the 25-minute film "Doris Salcedo's Public Works," which is part of the retrospective. And in the film you see the model for one piece that she has yet to realize but that would surely be welcome here.

It's titled "Palimpsest," and the idea for it was sparked by reports of the increase in mass shootings in the United States. The design is for a public plaza from the floor of which water drops would continually emerge to spell out the names of people killed. We already, of course, have names, plenty, and new ones: Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Lee Simmons Sr., Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and Myra Thompson. Now what we seriously need is something that Ms. Salcedo might provide: Art haunted enough to ask for the truth about why the victims of gun violence died, and haunting enough to preserve and refresh their memory.