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ARTS

Bodies of work: Doris Salcedo, the artist who dares to speak for the dead

Colombia's Doris Salcedo, best known for putting a crack in the floor of Tate Modern, talks to Nancy Durrant about her new exhibition in London, which remembers victims of war

Nancy Durrant

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Doris Salcedo: "The mass grave is a terrible, brutal fact of life that we ignore. It is an issue that art should be addressing"
CHRIS MCANDREW FOR THE TIMES

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Interviewing Doris Salcedo — best known here for the crack in the Turbine Hall floor at Tate Modern — is not what you would call a bundle of laughs. It's hardly surprising since, for more than 30 years, the artist, who hails from Bogota in Colombia, has responded to the experience of conflict with uncompromising and dramatic installations.

Ten years ago she embarked on *Plegaria Muda*, which is made up of tables with upturned tables on top, with a layer of soil between them and blades of grass pushing through the cracks. It commemorates the 2,500 — maybe more — young Colombians killed by the army between 2003 and 2009 and the thousands of mainly young, black Americans who died in gang shootings in southeast Los Angeles in the same period.

In 2002 she made *Noviembre 6 y 7*, in which she lowered chairs down the façade of the Palace of Justice in Bogota over the course of two days, to recall the lives lost in a siege there 17 years earlier, “marking the absence of each person at the approximate time the autopsy said that each person or group of people had died”. (She had in 2003 wedged 1,550 chairs between two buildings in Istanbul to evoke the masses of anonymous migrants underpinning the economy.)

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An installation of 1,550 used wooden chairs for the Istanbul Biennale (2003)
TATE GALLERY

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In 2016, in response to the Colombian electorate voting by a slim margin against a deal that would have ended the war between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, she made *Sumando Ausencias* (*Adding Absences*), covering Bolivar Square in Bogota with 7,000m of white fabric inscribed with the names of more than 2,000 people whose lives had been claimed by the war.

So yes. As you might expect, when I meet her — tiny, elegant in navy with big, dark eyes and a huge halo of curly greying hair — at White Cube gallery in Bermondsey, south London the conversation gets quite heavy, quite quickly.

“That was 0.7 per cent of the victims of this 53-year-old conflict,” she says when I ask her about *Sumando Ausencias*. “It’s nothing compared to the huge tragedy we’re living through.” We’re here, on a pristine and suitably uncomfortable sofa, drinking tea from china cups, because this month Salcedo will open a new exhibition at the gallery featuring two important works. The first is the largescale installation *Palimpsest*, recently seen at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid, in which drops of water slowly emerge from the floor to spell out the names of people who have died trying to reach Europe in search of a better life. The second is a new series of sculptures, *Tabula Rasa*, for which Salcedo has conducted many hours of interviews with victims of sexual violence at the hands of armed men.

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Palimpsest
PATRIZIA TOCCI

“In the Colombian conflict we have basically three players in the war: the army, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries,” Salcedo, 60, explains. “I’ve been working with victims of the three of them and I’ve been unable, in spite of hundreds of interviews and many books that I’ve read, to understand what is happening — why men do it. I’ve studied crimes such as forceful displacement — I understand that they want to steal land. Or forceful disappearance — I understand that they want to eliminate a political opponent. Kidnapping — you want money. There’s some logic for these crimes. But this crime of sexual violence, of rape, it doesn’t make sense. Why would you rape a six-year-old boy? What is the . . . you know?” she shakes her head in disbelief.

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The piece is made of wooden tables again. She uses commonplace, domestic objects and materials to stand in for the people upon whose lives she draws, and the table, she thinks, is particularly evocative of women, “giving nourishment, support”. It’s splintered into tiny pieces, then reassembled. “So what you have is a scar; the whole thing is a scar.”

It’s an apt image for a piece that acknowledges the day-in, day-out agony of people left to wallow in the aftermath of violence. “The way victims have to rebuild their life is painstaking, day by day, little by little. When you talk to them, the way they try to rebuild their lives — “now I have breakfast, now I do this” — it’s a story of epic dimensions. Just to go through the day and overcome the pain.”

Plegaria Muda addresses forced disappearances. According to the Colombian National Victims Registry, more than 47,000 people have vanished over the course of the conflict, leaving more than 120,000 family members in horrible limbo. While researching the art work, Salcedo visited mass graves in Colombia with grieving mothers in search of their missing sons.

These boys, aged between 16 and about 22, were lured from their homes by a military that had been promised bonuses according to the number of guerrillas they killed, Salcedo tells me. “The more bodies the army presented, the more rewards they would get,” she says. “So they would kill a boy, dress the boy as a guerrilla, and plant a weapon. And it was so crude, like if they were left-handed, they would have the weapon in the right hand; things like that. Very often when you are very poor, anyone can offer you anything and you will believe it. So these poor kids were offered jobs and they went willingly. Hannah Arendt talked about the banality of evil, this is the epitome of it.”

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Shibboleth at Tate Modern
(2007)

SHAUN CURRY/AFP/GETTY
IMAGES

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The resulting piece was like a labyrinth of coffins that you walked through at grave height. To say it's disconcerting doesn't go near it. "The mass grave is an image that I did not find in art," she says. "You have them everywhere, in Europe, all over. Spain still has a huge fight over whether to open them or not, and of course the Second World War — look at what happened in the former Yugoslavia. The mass grave is a terrible, brutal fact of life that we ignore. It is an issue that art should be addressing." Well, I respond weakly, when you put it like that . . .

Salcedo can't pinpoint the moment she decided to become an artist. "I was always drawing as a little girl, it was always there. It was not a choice. I was useless for anything else." Likewise her subject was ready-made. "I was born in 1958 and the war officially began in 1964. Besides that, in the Nineties we had the drug lords destroying and bombing Bogota. Until 1985 you didn't experience it really if you lived in the city, but you saw it on the news and my parents were very political." A small business owner and a seamstress, "they were always talking about politics, it was a constant.

"When you see it, when you actually witness it, it's a traumatic, unforgettable, terrifying experience," Salcedo says.

She has not been immune to criticism, with some artists and curators objecting that she was "taking over the voices of victims". "But if they were killed there's no way they can express themselves, right?" she says, almost but not quite laughing. "The only way they can be present is if we keep them in our memory and we bring them to the public sphere."

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The response of surviving victims, she says, has been nothing but positive, but on social media she is often attacked. It's part of the job, she says with a shrug. "That's part of the world that we live in. I learnt that you can be lynched on social media, but you can survive and censorship cannot be imposed. So you just have to avoid the temptation of self-censorship."

I wonder where she sits politically and am surprised to find her wistful for the centre. "I have always considered myself to be a leftist person, but these days we need a space in the centre. The far right won the elections in Colombia, so the centre has been completely erased. If there were a centre, I would love to be there, but that's no longer possible. It's a futile position now."

Despite all this, she insists, against the odds, that she is optimistic. "It's going both ways. In some places poverty has diminished, the conditions of workers have improved, a little bit. The condition of some dark-skinned human beings has improved; we're more recognised as human beings in the world. Not everything is lost, but we are at a critical moment." Does it feel precipitous? "Yes, but I'm hopeful. We have to believe that human beings are capable of doing wonderful things — and they actually are."

Doris Salcedo is at White Cube Bermondsey, London SE1 (020 7930 5373), from September 28 to November 11