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Doris Salcedo, Whose Art Honors Lives Lost, Gets a Retrospective in Chicago



Doris Salcedo
William Zbaren for The New York
Times

CHICAGO — When the elevators at the Museum of Contemporary Art here stop on the fourth floor, they usually open on a large, airy lobby with a view of Michigan Avenue. These days, they open onto a vast art installation by the Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo that evokes a mass grave.

The space is filled with wooden tables arranged in pairs, one resting upside down on the other, with a thick layer of soil sandwiched between. The work delivers a beauty and fragility that seems the very image of hope, as slender blades of grass poke through tiny holes in the wood. But the effect is also anxiety-inducing: Dozens of tables the size of coffins incite a feeling of claustrophobia.

Featured in Ms. Salcedo's first museum retrospective, which opens on Feb. 21 and runs through May 24, the walk-in graveyard of "Plegaria Muda" ("Silent Prayer") was inspired by her 2004 research into gang violence in Los Angeles and by the 2008 discovery that members of the Colombian Army had been killing innocent civilians and dressing their corpses in guerrilla uniforms to claim government bounties.

In modern, war-torn societies "we have lost our ability to mourn," Ms. Salcedo, 56, said in late January. "I want my work to play the role of funeral oration, honoring this life."

For nearly three decades, she has turned her intense gaze on violent deaths, from Colombia's civil war casualties to Chicago's young gun victims, as well as the "social death" of marginalized populations. But her artwork is more poetic than didactic, exemplified by her most famous commission: a 548-foot-long jagged crack created in the concrete floor of the Tate Modern in London in 2007 and presented — with the title "Shibboleth" — as an exploration of racism and the ostracism of immigrants.

Dressed simply in all black, with a shock of graying hair, she spoke of her deliberate, precise attempts to communicate a feeling of chaos, as in her crowded arrangement of table-graves. "I think every violent event generates disorientation," she said softly, with a light Spanish accent. "If your son is killed, your town is destroyed or you've been tortured, how do you relate to the world after that?"

Madeleine Grynsztejn, the director of the Chicago museum, believes this retrospective, which travels to the Guggenheim Museum in New York in June, will especially resonate with American museumgoers today. "Five years ago, we couldn't have predicted that economic and racial inequality here would come to such a head — with Ferguson and Staten Island and Trayvon Martin and Occupy Wall Street, but this is what Doris has been interested in from the beginning," she said. "I think great artists like Doris, they sense it, they see it, before the rest of us do."



Doris Salcedo's "Noviembre 6 y 7" recalled the 1985 siege at the Palace of Justice in Bogotá. Sergio Clavijo

Alexander and Bonin

Despite strong reviews and a presence in leading museum collections, Ms. Salcedo's work has not had much exposure in the United States until now. As Ms. Grynstejn points out, many pieces are hard to transport, being heavy, fragile or often both at once.

Ms. Salcedo's dislike of the art market's thirst for spectacle and its cult of celebrity clearly play a role as well. She dismissed the media coverage of "Shibboleth," dominated by reports of visitors tripping on the crack, as "distracting," adding, "it's easier to deal with that than really deal with the meaning of the piece."

And in rare instances when she agrees to interviews, she tends to focus on the emotional or intellectual underpinnings of her art (the death fugues of the German poet Paul Celan are one touchstone). Like a certain breed of old-school public intellectual, she rarely speaks publicly about her personal life. What is known: She grew up in Bogotá. She earned her master's of art at New York University before returning to Colombia. She is married to the Colombian novelist and sociologist Aziel Bibliowicz, who has written about the Jewish immigrant experience there.



A retrospective on Doris Salcedo includes what she calls "dysfunctional furniture."
William Zbaren for The New York Times



She did mention at the museum that she has never lost a family member to gun violence. Rather, she allows herself to absorb the losses of strangers, almost as if they were relatives, transforming her empathy into art.

This sense of grief is nearly palpable in the concrete furniture that fills a large gallery in the retrospective: wood tables, dressers, armoires and chairs rendered useless by the artist's interventions. Chairs have been upended. Armoires have been stripped of their handles. And empty drawers and other cavities have been filled in with rebar and concrete — "dysfunctional furniture," Ms. Salcedo calls it.

The series originated in the late 1980s when she began seeking out families of left-wing activists assassinated by Colombian death squads. She listened to survivors describing their loss, a process that she calls "witnessing" or "gathering testimony." At first, she obtained furniture directly from the grieving families. Later, she found other sources, but the symbolism remained: Furniture loaded down with concrete, no longer fit for human use, viscerally captures the loss of life.



She used hundreds of empty chairs to an equally haunting effect in a 2002 public work that unfolded over 53 hours on Nov. 6 and 7, the anniversary of the 1985 siege of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, in which about 100 people died, including Supreme Court justices. Her work consisted of lowering wood chairs from the roof of the building at the particular time of day each victim was believed to have been killed.

Alexander and Bonin

The biggest criticism of Ms. Salcedo's work is that she can go too far — “almost tipping into the sentimental,” in the words of the San Francisco Chronicle critic Kenneth Baker. But Julie Rodrigues Widholm, a Museum of Contemporary Art curator who organized the show with Ms. Grynstejn, praised this sort of intensity.

“I think her work signals a return to feeling in contemporary art — it's O.K. to have emotions in front of an artwork,” she said. “It's the kind of work that can take years of research and technical preparation to make, but all the labor disappears when you're looking at it.” Ms. Rodrigues Widholm also emphasized the handmade aspect that gives several of Ms. Salcedo's artworks in the retrospective their intimacy.



Part of “Plegaria Muda.” Patrizia Tocci

“A Flor de Piel” (colloquially translated as “Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve”), for instance, consists of more than 250,000 rose petals painstakingly stitched together to form a room-size shroud. Ms. Salcedo said that she got the idea after reading a report on the watchdog website **Verdad Abierta** (Open Truth) about a Colombian nurse who had been dismembered by paramilitary forces while still alive. The artist created a delicate “flower offering” for the nurse, a tender gesture against the brutality of death. “How do you touch a wound?” she asked.



“A Flor de Piel” is a tribute to a slain Colombian nurse. Ben Westoy

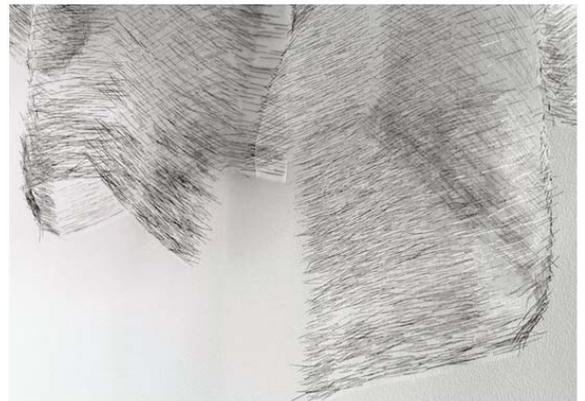
Ms. Salcedo noted that her mother made dresses, “fancy dresses,” but she suggests the weaving in her own art has a political, not personal, dimension: “If you come from the third world, that's where so much labor gets done.”

For a new artwork, “Disremembered,” she has woven bent sewing needles and silk thread together to create a kind of hair shirt. She said it was inspired by recent meetings with several mothers in Chicago who have lost children to gun violence.

Those interviews also fueled her vision for a yet-unrealized public project, “Palimpsest,” a tribute to children killed by gunfire, which she sought to install on the grounds of the Cabrini-Green housing towers, now demolished. She envisioned droplets of water that would spell out the names of recent gun victims. Step on one glistening name and it “comes back and back and back, with the persistence of a mother's grief,” Ms. Salcedo said. “It doesn't go away.”

At this stage, her unconventional memorial does not have sufficient funding or community support to be realized before the Chicago show closes. “Cities don't like to advertise the fact that they have so many deaths from gun violence,” she said.

Still, she is now considering sites in New York. “I'm obsessed,” Ms. Salcedo said, with a resolve that seems, like much of her art, to be sharpened by the public's indifference to suffering. “Even though nobody wants the piece, I'm still working on it.”



“Disremembered” was inspired by Chicago gun deaths. Doris Salcedo