



Catastrophe, Memory, Reconciliation

AN EXHIBITION BY

Osvaldo Ramirez Castillo

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CATASTROPHE, MEMORY, AND RECONCILIATION

Rarely has an artist succeeded in hitting their audience with both extremes of an emotional spectrum so simultaneously as Osvaldo Ramirez Castillo. At first glance, the natural grace of his drawings strikes in tandem with their brutal, raw violence. The tension between these poles is more unifying than it is divisive, this union being the birthplace of his work's power.

Castillo spent his formative childhood years surrounded by the civil war of his native El Salvador. At age 11 he immigrated with his family to Canada, creating a physical divide between this intense violence and entering a future that would be devoted to exploring its weight. The most prevalent theme in his work is a reimagining of this traumatic history; he cites stories overheard during wartime as one of his many source materials. Visual manifestations of these memories in his mixed media drawings – of severed limbs and branded skin – shine a stark and uncompromising light on the reality of war. Castillo somehow manages to surround these images of monstrous violence in the organic embrace of the motherland, bringing us deep into the restlessness of someone using art as an act of revision.

It is always striking to find an artistic approach as patient, meticulous, and uncompromising as that of Osvaldo Ramirez Castillo. In post-war art, there is a tendency towards abstraction when dealing with memory and emotion, but Castillo faces the complexities of historical trauma and the possibility of reconciliation head on. He is trained in printmaking and combines the influence of Latin American poster design with masterful drawing technique to bring a blurry history from the internal world to the definitive realm of materiality.

History, tradition and mythology are permeating elements of Castillo's body of work. Among explicit references to figures like Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez to fictional characters from literature like Gaspar Iloom, there are also references to Nahualism¹, iconography sourced from Christianity and organized gang culture. Castillo's visual language might be highly personal but his works remain grounded in cultural identity politics. In Castillo's new series, he explores the process of healing maintaining a focus on process. As writers have been said to understand their thoughts through the process of writing, the art of Castillo can be framed in a similar way – as a means of exploring how he feels. There is almost an implied goal of solace and acceptance in his production that is elusive if attainable at all. Over the span of his career, his use of different media mimics the constant evolution of techniques used to reconcile trauma.

Osvaldo's diaphanous drawings on mylar paper are executed with such delicate balance – of ink and watercolour, of nature and machine, of congestion and emptiness – that their aesthetic presence alone alludes to the complexities of the healing process. At times these drawings position Castillo as creator of this narrative world and at times the subjects seem to be in such power that they give the impression of having poured out of his memory on their own. Castillo's work refers to masters of art history while seeming to do so with visceral purity, as though he is cut from the same cloth of brutality as Goya, and granted the same omniscient perspective as Bosch.

¹ Or "Nahualism", the Mesoamerican belief that (certain) humans can transform into animals.

I have been overwhelmed trying to digest an entire vista of Osvaldo's work. As interwoven and hybrid as his drawings are, their narratives thankfully leave space (often physically in the form of empty white page-space) for the viewer to fill. The white space in many of his compositions is impossible to ignore and, to me, can intimate everything from his current temporal/geographical distance from his traumatic past, to the blank space of incomplete memory, to a future of possible reconciliation. In any case, there is space for something and this contributes to an underlying sense of hope that can sometimes surface when experiencing his work.

Castillo's experimentation with stop-motion animation and installation-oriented mediums support his encouragement to acknowledge difficult subject matter. By giving literal voices to the individuals, his short animations allow us to engage directly with the stories that comprise a greater narrative. A face, a name, a voice, and movement bring us out of the sea of symbolism and back to the reality that, at the heart of his work, are individuals. One short animation comes to mind when I think of Castillo's focus on process, in which the literal erasure of human figures is juxtaposed with Super-8 film footage. Castillo captured this footage on the roadway leading to the town El Mozote, the site of a horrific 1981 civil war massacre. Castillo lives and breathes the process of confronting the past.

In his current production, Castillo has also employed the traditional medium of sawdust carpets. These large-scale tapestries are most often used in Latin American religious contexts, created in slow, mandala-like processes for ritual and worship practices. Our attention is once again brought to the importance of detail, asking the viewer to apply a similar focus to the practice of reconciliation through his cultural heritage used as a framework to explore personal imagery.

Tradition is a complex entity that Castillo treats with care and respect. Still, he does not shy away from exposing the cultural effects that can be a direct result of tradition. The infamously brutal "Mara Salvatrucha" gang, which was formed in 1980s Los Angeles primarily by Salvadoran immigrants, can be understood as a direct bi-product of historical violence in Central America. As seen across many of Castillo's works, the "MS13" have a tradition of tattooing its gang symbols on the skin of its members. This practice ties themes of violence to visual language, as does the palimpsest of Castillo's paper.

Despite how much attention and emotional investment Castillo's body of work demands of us, there still seems to be something inherently sympathetic in his visual voice. When considering his grotesque depictions of violence and the weight of their non-fiction, it is difficult to speak of their beauty. But somewhere between the lines, there is poetry. There is something growing.

Alexis Hanchuk

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