

REQUIEM FOR MIRRORS AND TIGERS

NAUFUS RAMÍREZ-FIGUEROA



Requiem for Mirrors and Tigers
by Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa

grunt gallery
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IF I CAN'T DANCE,
I DON'T WANT
TO BE PART OF
YOUR REVOLUTION



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A REQUIEM FOR MIRRORS AND TIGERS INTRODUCTION

At grunt we are very excited to show an ambitious new series of works by Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa and to host the launch of a new publication by If I Can't Dance. *Requiem for Mirrors and Tigers* (2015-2017) features six new performances produced in six locations around Europe and America. The series, curated by Susan Gibb, is shown for its first time at grunt.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa has worked with grunt several times in the past, including performances at grunt or in conjunction with LIVE in the early 2000s and the exhibition *Children's Tears Laid Out To Dry* in 2007. It is with great pleasure we host his return.

Special thanks to If I Can't Dance and to Susan Gibb.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa's cycle of performances, *Requiem for Mirrors and Tigers*, was commissioned and produced as part of Corpus, an international network for commissioning new performance work. Corpus is: Bulegoa z/b, Bilbao; CAC, Vilnius; KW, Berlin; If I Can't Dance, Amsterdam; Playground, STUK and M - Museum Leuven; and Tate Modern, London. Corpus is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

by Glenn Alteen

A REQUIEM FOR MIRRORS AND TIGERS: A CYCLE OF PERFORMANCES BY NAUFUS RAMÍREZ-FIGUEROA

In response to our invitation to create a new work, artist Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa requested he take the opportunity to exhaust his interest in the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996). The topic defines his practice as it is intimately connected to his biography. Born in 1978 in Guatemala City, Ramírez-Figueroa grew up amidst an intensification of the war. In the early 1980s, the US-backed Guatemalan government increased its bloody campaign against leftist rebel groups, Maya indigenous people, and Ladino peasants. The onslaught forced Ramírez-Figueroa and his surviving family to flee via Mexico to Canada. It was in Canada during his teenage years that the artist developed his art practice that spans performance, video, watercolour, sculpture, and installation. He often uses his displacement from, and more recent return to, Guatemala as the lens through which to explore the entanglement of history and form.

So how can one disentangle oneself from such a defining history? Is there a way to move beyond the material and psychological impact of war? How can one become and approach this otherwise? As an attempt, Ramírez-Figueroa proposed a cycle of performances developed and presented at intermittent moments across the commission's twenty-four month period. He staged these among a network of presentation partners—Tate Modern, London; If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, Amsterdam; CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; and Casa do Povo, São Paulo.¹ Importantly, the artist approached “the stage” as both distinct spatial location in which performances would occur, and as temporal points, periods, or steps in a process of development, as moments to be passed through.

Likewise the meaning of “duration”—in terms of its most common application within the discipline of performance—became double: it came to refer not only to the endurance of the body through a physical act across an extended measure of time, but also to the larger, more unruly understanding of time's passage. As writer and curator André Lepecki reflects via a reading of Henri Bergson:

by Frédérique Bergholtz and Susan Gibb
If I Can't Dance, Amsterdam

Duration is not time *extended*. Actually duration has little to do with extension or other spatial references—this was Henri Bergson’s insight in *Time and Free Will* (1889). There duration simultaneously names both time’s “essence” and a very particular experience of time, rare and difficult: that of a quasi-unmediated exchange between a conscious subject and the plane of matter, in which “the communicative surface between the ego and external objects” endures a profound transformation and in which time is no longer measured, assessed, inserted into an economy but is *felt*.²

This question of how time is felt is at the heart of Ramírez-Figueroa’s project, with each of the six performances within the cycle—*Illusion of Matter* (2015); *The Print of Sleep* (2016); *Life In His Mouth, Death Cradles Her Arm* (2016); *Mimesis of Mimesis*, (2016); *Linnaeus in Terminus* (2016); and *Fino Fantasma*, (2017), collectively titled *A Requiem for Mirrors and Tigers* (2015–2017)—set within the subjective and symbolic realm of the dream. Colours and materials overflow and spew forth in excess, with their amplified tones and scales suspended between a haze of memories and imaginative flights of fancy, grounded by the unnerving and insistent presence of live bodies within a theatrical space.

Ramírez-Figueroa further evoked the dream state by presenting each performance at night-time. Using the transitional passage from one day to the next to full metaphorical effect, the moon’s glow was often a source of light. In contrast with natural illumination, HMI or fluorescent lighting bars also lit the space, carefully laid on the ground by Ramírez-Figueroa for each performance. The varied grid patterns of the lights clearly demarcated the space of performance as theatrical, drew a line of continuity across the cycle, and brought the staged figures and action into supernatural, high-definition relief through the radiant white light.

Within this general schema, for each new stage of the cycle the artist would construct a single image likened to the popular nineteenth-century artistic tradition of tableaux vivant (living picture). Watercolour

kit in hand, Ramírez-Figueroa would paint the fully resolved image from his mind in one sitting, as if the brush acted as a direct and an unmediated conduit between his innermost subconscious and the paper. The placement and description of objects, figures, and costumes in each watercolour became the basic scores from which performances were translated. Strikingly, while brought to life and three-dimensionality, the restraint and repetition of the performed actions further impressed or reinscribed the immediate impact of the original image, stressing the allegorical meaning to which each work respectively strove.

Ramírez-Figueroa’s use of allegory belies the purposeful abstraction that is also at play. Indeed his colourful, liquidous watercolours and the staging they divine, look nothing like photographic reportage documenting the Guatemalan Civil War. Within the cycle, any literal references to the war are transfigured, most often into something softer or more domestic. Their benign quality both relieves and amplifies the traumatic tension for which they stand in. This abstraction is also at the forefront of the personal position from which this story of the war is narrated. One is reminded that Ramírez-Figueroa’s memories are those of his child self, a view from before language and rational understanding would enable him to give a name to what was being seen, as well as from the stretched and lived time of daily reality, where life goes on even while it is under threat.

For example, the underlying content might cause one to expect skeletons or other visceral representations of the dead to crowd his performances. Instead, one sees furniture stripped of its upholstery to reveal its bare frame; in place of a gun-toting government army or militia, children hold fantastical oversized props; where there might have been an injured or a dead body, a figure gently sleeps or a well-dressed and friendly ghost appears. Similarly, the colours are not those you would expect given the subject: luminescent whites, ultraviolets, azure blues, and vivid yellows—no red in sight. As astutely observed by writer and editor Matthew McLean in a profile on

Ramírez-Figueroa, even when the performance involves physical harm (be it the pinning of feathers into his arm, or sewing buttons into his skin) no visible blood is shed.³

On Ramírez-Figueroa’s use of colour across his oeuvre, artist, educator, and social justice worker Betty Marin has suggested that it is a concrete rebuttal to the black and white narratives normally told of the Guatemalan Civil War, opening the topic to new often marginalized experiences, and quotes the artist as saying: “People who have gone through very traumatic things usually don’t have this black and white way to see things. I mean there is a lot of humor involved.”⁴ This tonal play is also evident in the artist’s preferred use of polystyrene to construct props. While often the hidden structure beneath theatrical constructions, Ramírez-Figueroa leaves it exposed, creating a purposeful contrast between the heaviness of this history, and the light touch of his approach to it.

In thinking of the weight of history latent in *A Requiem for Mirrors and Tigers*, it is crucial to consider the artist’s careful choice of the verb “exhaust” rather than “extinguish” to name his intention in dealing with this history’s force. This distinction is particularly relevant to his decision to film the performances—with some never occurring before a live audience, performed only for the camera—which become stand-alone video works. One could easily ask: is his choice to make a permanent record not a tautology in his attempt, enabling each element to be endlessly and effortlessly replayed? Would the oft-argued ephemeral nature of live performance have better served Ramírez-Figueroa in his pursuit? By capturing each performance on video, Ramírez-Figueroa has crafted a defined container for the expression and containment of strong emotions and memories he holds from the Guatemalan Civil War and its aftermath. Within these objective records, edited into a desired end result, the internal and dynamic action of memory and feeling are slowed, while their important continuity between the past and the living remains. In this way the work is not an exorcism, but a gesture of grief.

The resulting video works are active sites of remembering and witnessing, which make the boundaries between life and death, memory and experience, permeable. Their creation, and their permanence, opens up a new space to be perused. One could argue that the exhaustion Ramírez-Figueroa seeks is a personal movement forward through expenditure, a profound transformation through the effort of work and feeling. He can then arrive at a point where he might ask—enacting a persistent generational call and dream—“what next?”

¹ Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa’s cycle of performances was commissioned and produced as part of Corpus, network for performance practice: Corpus is Bulegoa z/b, Bilbao; CAC, Vilnius; KW, Berlin; If I Can’t Dance, Amsterdam; Playground (STUK & M - Museum, Leuven); and Tate Modern, London, and is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. Its structure assists artists in developing work over time and to evolve in repertory, through different institutions within the network collaborating on the presentation of these works at different institutional locations. Ramírez-Figueroa seized the potential of this network structure, as a way to create an elaborated and operatic scaled performance.

² André Lepecki, “Duration,” *In Terms of Performance*, <http://internsofperformance.site/keywords/duration/andre-lepecki>, 16 January 2018.

³ Matthew McLean, “Don’t Go Seeking Answers in the Earth,” *Frieze*, 14 October 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/dont-go-seeking-answers-earth>, 17 January 2018.

⁴ Betty Marin, “Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa’s Color and Tone Metaphors,” *KCET Link*, 4 June 2015, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/naufus-ramirez-figueroas-color-and-tone-metaphors>, 17 January 2018.



Linnaeus in Tenebris
2017
18 mins 40 secs



Fino Fantasma
2017
8 mins 23 secs



