

Oswaldo Ramirez Castillo at the Grunt Gallery
(in the style of Canadian Art reviews)



Detail, No title available, Oswaldo Ramirez Castillo, 2015

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Upon entering the small space of the Grunt Gallery, the mixed media drawings of Osvaldo Ramirez Castillo come across as aesthetically pleasing works of richly and skillfully rendered exotic flowers and mythical figures. It's not long though before a burdensome narrative reveals itself through gruesome details—a soldier missing his lower body, a snarling dog, a beheaded cow covered in a blood-red wash. In “Catastrophe, Memory, Reconciliation”, Castillo revisits childhood experiences of El Salvador, his native home and a sight of violence of the 1980s civil war. Based in Vancouver since 2013, Castillo immigrated to Canada (Montreal) with his family at the age of 11.

This body of work fits within the Grunt's mandate to feature international contemporary artists that deal with a “diverse Canadian identity” (Grunt). The theme of reconciliation in Castillo's work, although steeped in Latin American war history, is particularly timely at a time when Canada is confronting its own history of colonization of the indigenous population. And as Reconciliation Canada focuses on “dialogue and transformative experiences,” so does the work of Castillo. Castillo's drawings confront memories and the “recycled stories” he heard as a child (Castillo). But no linear story unfolds here; instead we are privy to moments of frozen memory, such as the snarl of a ferocious dog, or the gesture of a soldier as he looks over his shoulder away from a pile of debris containing limbs, shoes, guns, traditional masks, and vegetation that the soldier seems to be dragging along with him. It is worth noting that the artist chose not to display titles or to include an artist statement, perhaps allowing us to construct our own narratives, but an essay by Alexis Hbranchuk of Yves Laroche Galerie d'art in Montreal provides ample background information.

Piles of shoes, soldiers, guns, megaphones, clusters of flowers, dogs, and pre-Columbian mythological figures are only some of the images that Castillo recycles over and over again. As a child he heard the story of the shoes—piles of them were left behind in the countryside and were

used to identify the dead (Castillo). The act of recycling and re-positioning imagery and stories seems to speak to a process of re-construction and healing, of working through a traumatic experience. The figure in fact is a significant image in Castillo's work as it is treated as a site of trauma (The Drawing Centre). Castillo's exploration of history, tradition, mythology and personal experience has permeated his body of work (Hranchuk) since at least 2007 (The Drawing Centre). But while older work was more explicitly violent and redolent of bestiary imagery reminiscent of Bosch and Goya (Hranchuk, Redgrave), his current work is more subdued in nature. Could this be the result of working through a process that has finally brought him to reconciliation, as the title of the exhibition suggests?

What renders this work approachable is the beauty and the skill that first jumps out at you. Perhaps this is Castillo skillfully employing trickster strategy. He hooks us in and holds our attention as we begin to focus in on the details. It is difficult not to look; it is too beautiful even if fraught with violence. The unframed vellum substrate makes for a soft, velvety background within which desolate landscapes float. Ample white space, more present in this work than before, also allows us to linger longer. Castillo's skillful use of collage is only apparent if one looks at the side of the work, the technique adds richness and depth to the toned line drawings and watercolour washes.

Castillo's exploration of his subject matter extends beyond the drawing medium. The images hang around a sawdust carpet—a traditional medium used in Latin American religious celebrations (Hranchuk). The carpet depicts one of the soldier images Castillo uses in his drawing work. We are allowed to walk on the carpet and destroy/erase the image much as the artist takes on this activity of eraser in the stop-animation work in the back gallery where two looping films play next to each other. The film on the left shows drawn portraits of Salvadorians who are slowly erased from the image (reminiscent of William Kentridge's animations), and on

the right, scratched vintage-looking footage of a road leads to a village where a massacre took place.

Castillo asks us to contemplate this history of El Salvador and to witness its effects on the imagination after the fact. Much like recent reconciliation events throughout Canada, Castillo has embarked on his own reconciliation of El Salvador's history. While El Salvador's civil war seems far removed from the Canadian experience, Castillo reminds us that a Canadian identity is varied indeed. Of lasting impression though upon leaving the gallery, is the process and the feeling of the powerful therapeutic power of art.

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