REVIEW

Oscar Muñoz: Protographies
JEU DE PAUME
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In the past, priests helped negotiate the passage from material world to afterlife. Today, we often look to philosophers and artists to help us fathom the puzzling polarity between life and death. The Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz is a modern-day priest. Through his manipulation of ephemeral materials—water, dust, heat, sun, time—Muñoz reenacts, again and again, the mystery of our coming and going, mediating the existential chasm between presence and absence.

In a sublime magic show at Jeu de Paume, many of the alchemical experiments that have occupied Muñoz for the past forty years were on display. From the artist’s intensive research with materials and processes has come an eclectic body of work, ranging from his early photorealist charcoal drawings of tenement interiors to his most recent video installations. Persistent themes are the lived spaces of Muñoz’s city, Cali, and the poverty and violence they’ve hosted. His attention to light and shade is inspired by the city’s particular quality of light that, around midday, bleaches everything out to shimmering white.

And, since Muñoz’s first darkroom witness of an image appearing in a developing tray, photography has also been central. It exists as an element within mixed-media works, but also figures as metaphor for what Muñoz finds most compelling: the pregnant moment between latent and visible image, between being and not, between memory and forgetting. It is around that “protographic” moment that Muñoz dances—bringing it to life, then aborting it.

In this retrospective, all but one of the works previously captivated earlier audiences. Many emphasize the relational dynamic between subject and other. In Aliento (Breath, 1996–2002) viewers at first see only their own reflections mirrored in a row of circular disks of polished steel. But their moist, warm breath on the plates brings others to life. Appearing in the fleeting fog are faces of the deceased—victims of civil and drug wars—that Muñoz gathered from newspaper obituaries and then screen printed. Like a daguerreotype, only fully revealing its silveryed subject when the viewer’s physical position is shifted, Aliento requires labor to keep the dead alive.

Proyecto para un Memorial (Project for a Memorial, 2005) also articulates cycles of presence and loss. Five video projections are arranged in a line; Muñoz’s hand appears in one screen after another as it attempts to sketch portraits onto pavement with a brush dipped in water. As the hand quickly and deftly outlines each face, the first marks are already evaporating in the hot sun. Racing to complete one portrait after another, Muñoz traces memory’s futile struggle against time.

In a similar way, Narcisos (en proceso) (Narcissi [in process], 1994–ongoing) uses water and air to express the instability of being. Six large square Plexiglass containers are filled with water. Floating on some of these surfaces are small squares or torn bits of paper, showing such imagery as a map of Cali and pages of text from a book. On top of these paper supports or sitting directly on the water’s surface float images of a face (Muñoz’s own, at a younger age), made from pressing charcoal through photographic silk-screen. Throughout the exhibition, time, air, and water did their work against existence and memory. The water slowly evaporated, the faces losing their flimsy supports and, finally, settling on the bottom as dry and lifeless sediment.

These themes and materials were reiterated in Narciso (Narcissus, 2001). In this video, a line-drawn portrait made with screen-printed charcoal dust sits on the water’s surface in a white sink. As the water slowly escapes through the bottom drain, the face collapses and disappears along with it. In looped reversal, the face blooms to life again, before repeating its inevitable decline. Sigmund Freud illustrated how the psyche manages loss through symbolization...
and repetition: he observed his grandchild Ernst, responding to his mother’s repeated departure, performing his grief through a game. He would send away a spool on a string, saying the word fort (gone), and then pull it back to him with the word da (here). Through his invocation and dissolution of the imago, Muñoz plays “the complete game—disappearance and return.”

Inhabitants of Muñoz’s hometown were brought back to life in two related pieces. In the 1970s, fotocineros worked the Cali streets, hoping the passersby they photographed would purchase their candid portraits. Muñoz acquired several archives of these photographs. In an installation in Cali, he projected some of the images from the Ortiz Bridge onto the flowing Cali river beneath. The projections were videotaped and presented here as El Puente (The Bridge, 2004). The subjects, captured in mid-stride, are now returned to moving life, transparent and blending blue with river stones. With sounds of river water moving through them, their substance drains back into the flowing water.

Much of the exhibition’s magic culminated in a final darkened room where three video installations incorporated Muñoz’s portrait archive of his own personal photographs, found media images, and iconic portraits from art and photography history. Cíclope (Cyclops, 2011) draws affinities between the one-eyed mythological monster and the camera lens, which similarly devours its subjects. Into a vessel of swirling water (in fact, a toilet), a hand inserts a portrait, then quickly withdraws a now blank sheet, its image sucked from its surface into the vortex. The blackening water becomes thick with the remains of erased bodies.

In the technically and conceptually complex El Colecionista (The Collector, 2014), a row of small sheets of paper, each one either blank or holding a photographic portrait, were propped on a ledge that stretched across the wall. Overlaid across this wall was a three-channel video projection showing the artist’s back as he moves slowly back and forth across the wall. He picks up one sheet and replaces it with another, interchangeably blank or with a portrait, from a stack in his hands. Each decision is a weighty determination of a subject’s precarious existence or absence.

Muñoz’s efforts to fend off death through memory is common territory for artists. Through his senses and his words, Marcel Proust brought lost time to blossom. But, for Muñoz, no sooner is memory called up than it is sent off again. Photography, in its ability to both preserve life and declare its absence, is for Muñoz a most suitable medium and metaphor.

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