A Sense of Place: Colombian Artists on Violence and Exile

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Marta Jimena Cabrera was born in Bogotá, Colombia. She moved to Australia to undertake a PhD in Cultural Studies at the University of Wollongong. She has returned to live in Bogotá. Her work deals mostly with memory and identity in the field of the visual arts.

In this paper, she examines the response of the latest generation of Colombian artists to the grave socio-political situation of their country. In the past few years around one million Colombians have become internal refugees, fleeing violence and poverty. Such displacement is not entirely new and has, in the past, been addressed by such notable painters as Alejandro Obregon and Fernando Botero. Currently, as the situation has worsened; issues surrounding the disruption of everyday life, brought about by the loss of place, have come to the attention of a new generation of Colombian artists working in other media, including performance artists Maria Teresa Hincapié, sculptor Doris Salcedo, video artist José Alejandro Restrepo, and installation artist Oscar Muñoz. This paper explores the strategies by which contemporary Colombian visual artists address issues of loss, memory, and displacement, bringing these issues into the public sphere and seeking to inscribe them in collective memory.

The displacement of civilians in Colombia as a consequence of violence has a long and convoluted history. My father’s family, for instance, was displaced from its province in the 1950s, a period known, appropriately, as La Violencia. The family was lucky, not only because they fled before a potential massacre, but also because they were able to go back to their land. Today, however, my father, now retired, is again unable to live on the land he inherited from his father because to do so is still dangerous.

The dynamics of terror have, in fact, shifted since the time of the bipartisan violence of my father’s childhood. Besides the army and the guerrillas, the paramilitary and drug traffickers have come to make Colombia’s violence an extremely complex phenomenon of decentralised repression (with many forces involved), occurring at the intersection of territorial and economic interests, neoliberalism, corruption, and...
state weakness. The civilian population is forced to flee, not as a mere by-product of armed confrontations between these factions, but rather as the result of direct intimidation, terror, and extortion, as parties to the conflict settle scores by attacking civilians suspected of sympathising with the adversary. Hence, displacement in Colombia must now be seen as a strategy of war aimed at different objectives: the establishment of control over territories, expanded cultivation of illicit crops, or to the seizure of land and private property. In order to save their lives, around three million people have undergone displacement within the country in the last fifteen years, most of them fleeing to the impoverished shantytowns encircling many cities, where they are often even more exposed to crime and violence. As a result of the high level of violence against them, both during and after flight, displaced people are often reluctant to register with authorities or even seek humanitarian assistance. Around half of these are women and children and a disproportionate number of displaced persons are members of minority groups. Although Afro-Colombians make up only sixteen percent of the Colombian population and indigenous people two percent, together they account for more than one-third of all displaced people.

The anger and aspirations of displaced people have been expressed in numerous statements and in testimonies appearing in academic studies on displacement:

After the killing of several relatives we did not want to leave, so we were threatened again; they returned several times and sprayed the house with bullets, we had to remain under the bed all day. (Alvarez-Correa 1998: 37)

I don’t want to return to my land because of violence. I don’t want to remember what happened. (51)

I’d like to live like I did before, having food, clothes and housing, so as not to feel displaced. (79)

I’d like to make myself up once in a while, like before, and not remain like I am now […] without makeup, to put on a good pair of shoes. Like that […]. (79)

Within this context of ongoing turmoil, violence seems so pervasive that it appears as a mythical force that engulfs everything, as Michael Taussig argues in an essay on Colombia, appropriately entitled ‘Terror as Usual’: