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'Counter-Archives of the Narco City' looks at victims of drug trade's violence

Artists confront reality of drug trade's violence



Alma Leiva's "Celdas" series of photographs is part of the exhibit "Counter Archives to the Narco-City" through Dec. 13 at the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art. Photo provided ALMA LEIVA

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By Evan Gillespie Tribune Correspondent

"Counter-Archives to the Narco City," an exhibition currently up at the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art, confronts the problem of drug-fueled violence in Mexico and Honduras through metaphor and abstraction. The show exhibits the work of two artists, both of whom attempt to keep the focus on the victims of the violence while stepping away from specific, literal depictions of the violent acts themselves.

Adriana Corral's subject is the violence surrounding the drug trade, along with political corruption that allows it to flourish, in and around Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and the two pieces included in the show draw upon the symbolic weight of the victim's names and the significance of ritual in preserving their memory. "Impunidad, Circolo Vicioso, 2015" is a simple metaphor; it consists of victims' names transferred onto a panel, layered and obscured until they are illegible, and formed into two conjoined circles whose edges are blurred and indistinct.

Corral's "Within the Ashes" is an installation built on an act of ritualistic performance. To begin the piece, Corral writes the names of victims on pieces of paper and then burns the paper to ash. She then mixes the ash with pigment and uses the mixture to create a map of Ciudad Juarez, marked with the spots where the victims' bodies were found, on the gallery floor. The intent is to combine the memory of the violence with a geographic awareness of the city.

The photographs of Alma Leiva also rely on the concept of constructed installation, but here the viewer is another step removed from the construction of the work. For her “Celdas” series of photographs, Leiva built careful replicas of working-class living spaces from her childhood home of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and then photographed the artificial sets. Inside the colorfully painted and furnished mock rooms of her installations, Leiva inserts elements of the outdoors — a soccer pitch, a playground, the beach, a pinata — to symbolize the manner in which these living spaces become the entirety of their residents’ worlds, prison cells that keep the people trapped in one of the most violent cities in the world.

Using art to communicate the reality of tragedy and injustice to viewers is a tricky proposition. One approach is to assault viewers with explicit references to the tragedy — to show them exactly what has happened without allowing them to look away — but Corral and Leiva have specifically declined to use such direct and facile tactics. Instead, they’ve covered their messages with symbols and crafted their statements in pieces whose meanings are as dependent on the process of creation as they are on the final result.

The drawback of such an approach is that it creates a complex — and potentially difficult to navigate — distance between the viewer and the meaning of the work. Especially when cultural differences stand between the viewer and the subject, the impact of the message may be muted or even lost as it’s filtered through layers of symbolism. In these works, the scope of the tragedy becomes difficult to grasp; are we to see the victims as individuals — and doing so is not easy in the absence of faces or legible names — or are we to see them as a faceless generality, a symptom of cultural dysfunction?

The pieces in this show do not give up their meanings without investment on the part of the viewer. They say nothing obvious at a glance, and they demand contemplation and inquisitiveness. Like the difficult and troubling situations that inspired them, they are puzzles not effortlessly solved.



Adriana Corral's "Impunidad Circulo, 2015" is one of Corral's works in the exhibit "Counter Archives to the Narco-City" through Dec. 13 at the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art. Photo provided



Adriana Corral's "Impunidad Circolo, 2015" is one of Corral's works in the exhibit "Counter Archives to the Narco-City" through Dec. 13 at the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art. Photo provided

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