

## Tacla's Painting and the Strategies of Contradiction

By Florencia San Martín



*Jorge Tacla by Ari Maldonado*

I met Jorge Tacla at the beginning of 2012 in New York. Following our first meeting, Jorge invited me to visit his studio located at 39th Street and 6th Avenue, where, after a relaxed conversation about his work, he showed me two large-format paintings he was preparing for the *Emergency Pavilion* at the 55th Venice Biennale. The paintings, which depict the Syrian conflict and the Gaza Massacre with monochrome landscapes of ruins (the latter took place between December 2008 and January 2009, against Hamas), deal with victim-offender relations, and the multiple personalities that stem from the psyche of aggressors—strategies of brutality, innocence, and kindness—and the psyche of victims—ways of resistance, subordination, and strategic empathy. I remember discussing all of this for a long time, talking about how to think of History and its merciless memory from a psychological perspective, but also from the point of view of Time's specter, and the heavy psychological substance that runs through it. Today, with Tacla's second solo exhibition at Cristin Tierney—the Chelsea based gallery that has represented the artist since 2010—something similar takes place, but around different stories, memories, and landscapes.

The exhibition, titled *Hidden Identities*, reveals an imminent contradiction between the psyche of victims and the psyche of aggressors: an inscrutable, ever-changing, unsettling psychological substance that runs densely through time, and seems to point towards the secret of Tacla's painting. It consists of 19 small-format paintings (33 x 40 cm each), two large-format paintings (each 2 meters high), and a series of 66 drawings on notebook sheets displayed on the wall in a grid-like arrangement. Various historical, literary, and media

interpretations establish a dialogue with each other, reshaping and insisting upon the wide array of sensations experienced by subjects involved in extreme situations of torture and pain. Let us consider, for example, *Identidad Oculca 78*. There, behind a sweep of gray hues, the portrait of Marcia Merino appears. Known as “la flaca (skinny) Alejandra”, Marcia was a communist militant who, after being tortured, became an informant for Chilean secret police, DINA (National Intelligence Directorate), and she collaborated directly with Miguel Krassnoff during Pinochet’s dictatorship. In Tacla’s painting, Marcia’s eyes gaze outside the frame, perhaps at her torturer, at the betrayed, or at the void. She has impermeable eyes, volatile eyes that never let themselves be seen. On the other hand, we, the spectators, can see. We see a naked thin body in an interior space that becomes claustrophobic. We want to step inside the painting to understand, but the painting seems to be pushing forward, preventing us from imagining categories in which we can inscribe emotions with a single voice. “I was the symbol of betrayal,” says “la flaca” on several occasions throughout the documentary Carmen Castillo made about her life. “I was too weak to endure torture.” But Castillo insists that the ghosts were not dead. The ghosts were still there, in a time of terror, shame, and survival. Tacla has installed the painting of a river right next to Merino’s portrait. Just like Merino’s gaze, the river is impenetrable, dark, and violent, and the painting seems to pan photographically over the river as an allegory of what it devastates and contains. Many of the bodies that disappeared during the dictatorship were thrown by the military into Chilean waters.

After Marcia and the river, the feminine face reappears twice in the exhibit: in *Identidad Oculca 104*, and in *Identidad Oculca 109*. In both cases, the women depicted are based on real life models who might be asleep or—if we consider references to art history—dead. Thus, the pose of the woman in *Identidad Oculca 109* alludes to the famous painting *The Death of Marat*, made by Jacques-Louis David in 1793. Social historian of art T.J. Clark has noted that David dignifies Marat’s death by showing evidence of his murder: Charlotte Corday’s letter, from the woman who stabbed the journalist while pretending to be a Jacobin [1]. In turn, not only the letter but also a reference to the Christ in Michelangelo’s *Pietà* enables David to immortalize the pose in his painting as a sign of nobility. The painter is telling us that, just like Christ, Marat is a victim, too: a hero to be remembered forever young and beautiful. Many artists have revisited Marat’s pose, famously widespread in Western collective imagination. One picture from *Pictures of Garbage* by Brazilian artist Vik Muñoz comes to mind, but also Jorge Tacla’s *Identidad Oculca 109*. Here Tacla has replaced Marat’s masculine figure with the figure of a woman who could—allegorically—represent Charlotte Corday. In this way, Tacla takes part in the historical meaning of the quote. He superimposes a reference to the aggressor on the victim’s pose, merges renowned figures in art history, and—at the same time—negates singular structures with a gesture of contradiction. Very cleverly, Tacla is saying that the history of representation has had an impact on binary history, the kind of history that prevents contradictions and hidden identities. Thus, in *Identidad Oculca 109*, instead of lying in David’s elegantly blood-stained bathtub, a man and a woman are portrayed lying in what seems to be a bed. The bed, as we know, can be a place for pleasure, but also for betrayal. We go back to the beginning of the exhibition: the first thing we see upon entering the gallery is an unmade blue bed, perhaps foreshadowing the story of “la flaca” Alejandra, and the universal history that emanates from paintings depicting anonymous subjects in a contradictory state of failure and desire.

As we saw in the river painting, not only portraits can represent multiple possibilities in the psyches of victims and aggressors, but landscapes can, too. Donald Kuspit has noted that, during the ‘90s, Tacla began working on a series of paintings about empty architectures in the negative, and then went on to represent political events by making urban landscapes visible. Kuspit refers to this period in Tacla’s work as “the negative view of history” [2]. In his current

exhibition at Cristin Tierney, Tacla turns again to landscape as a space in which current events, memory, and history come together; he doesn't fill up his paintings with negatives, but in some cases preserves the external structure. Let us consider—for instance—large format paintings, such as *Identidad Oculta 112*. Using images from weapons factories located in the Basque Country before World War II as a reference framework, Tacla argues that factory employees worked as a means of subsistence, not because they were engaged in military aggression. This constitutes a bold criticism of the logic of capitalism and the socioeconomic hierarchic patterns that arise from it. Contradictions continue to emerge: painting, a medium in which Tacla is notably comfortable, has become fluid—beautiful—due to the combination of oil and cold wax. However, underneath the materiality of his work, the artist only reinforces the traces of a society full of secrets, recognizing the many psychological layers of the world of victims and aggressors, and insistently depriving it from a weak categorization associated to victimization and finite aggression.

When I visited Tacla's exhibition at Cristin Tierney, I remembered our first conversation in his studio: the day he showed me the paintings he was preparing for the Biennale. At that time—as part of a graduate seminar on art, memory, and human rights I was taking at Columbia University—I was reading an article by Alberto Moreiras about the enigmatic story of Felipe Agüero and Emiliano Meneses. We talked about this episode that made a lot of noise in academia. The anecdote goes more or less like this: in a conference organized by FLACSO in 1988, Agüero—then a graduate student at Duke University—recognized one of his torturers from 1973, Emiliano Meneses. In 1988 the Chilean dictatorship was still in power, so Agüero remained silent. He kept his trauma hidden for thirteen years. Only in 2001—more than a decade after he recognized his aggressor—did Agüero send a letter to the Catholic University of Chile denouncing Meneses, then a full professor at the Institute of Political Sciences. To what extent could the university be complicit in such an accusation? As demonstrated in a book edited by Patricia Verdugo, this is what many scholars and journalists throughout the world were wondering. But as Moreiras points out, beyond any ethical debate, this story “must be taken as reference due to its strange temporality.” Under the specter of time, the psyche of victims moves from fear, to shame, and to rage. Just like in Tacla's paintings, speech is inhibited, and opposing emotions emerge in the mind of human beings [3]. Parallel to Agüero's struggle with time, in *Hidden Identities* there is a dense and unsettling temporality that becomes visible in what is left behind. A psychological element is added to the years of silence: the landscape. Let us think again about the small painting of the gray river.

To the right of the river, we can see more landscapes—all in blue or grey hues—depicting contradictory states of mind. In this way, we observe *Identidad Oculta 73, 80, and 74*, three small format paintings alluding to the recent Israel-Palestinian conflict. We see places in ruins at a time where neither combat nor torture are shown, but where their residue—debris?—remains. Maybe what remains is also what is being born. Tacla shows us an image that is atrocious and beautiful at the same time: a subjective landscape in close proximity to its memory. This is a landscape impossible to forget. It's a landscape that turns ruins into current events and living memory, just like in Anselm Kiefer's paintings—which is what I thought when I visited the exhibit. It is not a coincidence that Kiefer and Tacla share similar themes: an allusion to the Holocaust, in Kiefer's case, and references to the Israel-Palestinian conflict in Tacla's work. They share the same theoretical background: an appreciation of landscape in close proximity to collective memory. As every painter would acknowledge, pain cannot be measured nor compared, but it can be represented by the symbols that history leaves on landscapes. Art historian Simon Schama has written extensively on this subject. I wonder what he might think about Tacla's work...

A previous version of this exhibition was shown last year at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile. It had the same title but it didn't include large-format paintings, and there were no weapons factories depicted. However, some of the small-format paintings were exhibited. This accounts for what Ricardo Brodsky and María José Bunster wrote in the Chilean catalogue: "*Hidden Identities* addresses human beings from their basic anthropological characteristic, that is what makes them stand out as contradictory beings. It was an honor for the Museum to establish a dialogue with audiences about horror, violence, and abuse of power from a contemporary perspective, and to offer new views on the Museum's mission as represented by its permanent collection." A new gaze is one that doesn't blame, one that doesn't judge, and, therefore, one that doesn't try to enshrine. This case could be made if we consider the concept of memorialization in its most conservative sense. Putting forward new ways of seeing, entails a revision of the psyche of subjects—such as "la flaca" Alejandra—involved in extremely painful situations. Why don't we talk about her?

Jorge Tacla's exhibition at Cristin Tierney Gallery differs from the version presented at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights due to an economic factor: the bold allusion to capitalistic fabrication of weapons in the mid-twentieth century finds its contingency today. As we indicated before, this exhibit addresses the multiple psychological possibilities in victims of torture, and in torturers. It also takes into consideration the landscapes in which they lived or died, or in which they experienced pleasure or suffered betrayal. Not only the body and its decisions, but also the landscape in which the body operates with its contradictions is present; even when it negates the linear idea of progress favored by modernity. In this manner, cold wax makes everything exist (and not exist) in a liquid, ambivalent space. "It is all about cutting the skin open," the artist told me a few days ago, "like performing a postmortem examination to discover another identity." He went on to tell me how he had discovered a few years ago the work of Roxana Ferllini, a London-based forensic anthropologist specializing in the Spanish Civil War, and in the Rwandan and Armenian genocides. Tacla has found in her books a very powerful source of ideas and reflections. Many of them ended up being portrayed in his series of drawings, and in the title of the exhibition—which alludes to a chapter in Ferllini's book.

Are the women asleep? Maybe not: tracing the title back to the world of forensics, helps us to understand that the woman in *Identidad Oculta 104* is not asleep; she lays just like Charlotte Corday on Marat's body, stealing away the secret of her hidden identity. Thus, focusing on the feminine subject in his series of portraits, Tacla indicates that there are infinite layers of femininity that emerge for women, and that they go beyond the domestic environment of family. Tacla insists upon the complexity and multiplicity of human minds. Of course, only a forensic doctor can unearth the secret of identity after death from a scientific perspective. But, as we can see in this exhibition, painting can also refer to this encounter with the unknown, through its illuminated strategies of contradiction.

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[1] See Clark, T.J., *Farewell to an idea: episodes from a history of modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1999).

[2] See Donald Kusipt, "Visión negativa: la belleza mórbida de las pinturas de Jorge Tacla," (14-67), en *Jorge Tacla: pinturas*, 2008.

[3] See Alberto Moreiras, "El otro duelo: A punta desnuda." In Richard, Nelly and Moreiras, Alberto eds., *Pensar en/la postdictadura*. Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 2001, 315-330.