

CRISTIN TIERNEY

AMA | ART MUSEUM of the AMERICAS

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2015

Jorge Tacla's Human-Made Catastrophes: A Conversation with the Artist

by Jessica Gesund, AMA | Art Museum of the Americas



In recent days, the world has been shaken by the Paris and Beirut bombings and shootings and the downing of a Russian airliner. These attacks were aimed not at military targets but at civilians, some of who were enjoying a Friday evening in a restaurant, a concert hall, a sports stadium; public places not too different from where we all spend leisure time. It is perhaps for this reason that they have hit close to home and raised questions, which are often unasked in societies not regularly afflicted by acts of war. Beginning with the attack on the Palacio de la Moneda in Chile in 1973, Jorge Tacla's work has been inspired by similar violent events. The artworks featured in his "Hidden Identities" exhibition, displayed at OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas for the winter season, are based on events such as the Oklahoma bombings, the violent conflict in Syria, and the 9-11 attacks. "Hidden Identities" denounces these human-made catastrophes through art that questions societal notions of power and human nature. Through the general themes displayed in his art, Tacla explores issues that have been studied extensively among societies most directly affected by conflict. These issues include: the impact of trauma in memory, collective and individual; the relationships between victims and aggressors; and the ways in which mass media and structures of power shape our views of tragedy.

During AMA's guided tours of the exhibition, audiences responded with great interest to Tacla's work and the artist himself. Who is this man who portrays these shocking images? To what degree is he

CRISTIN TIERNEY

disturbed by these awful occurrences? To begin to answer these questions we've interviewed Tacla about "Hidden Identities." Hearing the artist expound on his work reveals glimpses of Tacla, his background, and his views.

AMA-JG: *Your work in "Hidden Identities" deals for the most part with human-made catastrophes and explores their impact on the human victims, as well as the relationships between victims and aggressors; however, most of the pieces depict architectural structures and not people. Why is this?*

Jorge: For me it all began with what happened in Chile during 1973; this has been the "tension focus" of my work. When the Palacio de la Moneda was hit on September 11, 1973, it was the first time I realized that man-made constructions could be so fragile. The presidential palace was a symbol of State power and government and after that moment I realized that even those great institutions were immensely fragile. This experience, which I had at a very young age, is what has led me to focus mostly on architectural structures.

I depict the structures from multiple perspectives. I go from the more intimate spaces inside the buildings, such as the bedroom, to the lateral views of the buildings and the more global views of the attacked structure. Once buildings have been struck, they are no longer rigid cement structures, they become more organic and thus they are more similar to the human body. When the building opens up because of a catastrophe, its internal biology is exposed. Its bursting tubes and poles resemble the human body with its veins, muscles, and bones.



AMA-JG: *By depicting these structures in their more organic state do you seek to draw a link with the bodies of the victims inside them?*

Jorge: My work always has a denouncing element. The violation of the victims' human rights is a subject that is present in the majority of my works. The contemplative space of art plays an essential role in society. Once you read the newspaper you throw it into the garbage, but art stays. You have Picasso's "Guernica," for example. Years after the end of the Spanish Civil War, it continues to remind us of those who suffered during the attack of this city.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

AMA-JG: *Why do you focus on the “perspective of the after,” without providing any type of narrative or information about the moments before the event takes place or the moment when the event takes place? Why is this perspective powerful in your opinion?*

Jorge: I depict these human-made structures at their most fragile state, the moment immediately after they have been impacted and the moment right before they fall to the ground and transform into rubbish. I depict the structures when they are still dangling, as if with their last breath, when they are at their most vulnerable state.

When I witnessed the attacks on the Palacio de la Moneda in Chile during September 11, 1973 and I saw the fragility of this institutional site, my vision about human-made structures changed. I realized everything can fall, everything can vanish in the air. The “Perspective of the After” represents that moment when structures lay in their most vulnerable state. After that moment, if the building falls and vanishes, there is no longer a memory of what was there before. That is why the “Perspective of the After” is: the moment just before the building vanishes, just before it is eliminated from memory.

AMA-JG: *What role does memory play in your work?*

Jorge: In my work, memory and human skin reacts in the same way once it is affected by trauma. If you are punched, your skin bruises, it is marked. Memory develops those sequels as well. The marks on memory are what interest me, because they are also the marks which lead to the unhinging of human beings. For instance, when children are abused in their households, the memories of this abuse lead them to develop internal conflicts. These conflicts can then lead to other larger societal conflicts. How many young people have we seen in recent years who become perpetrators of violent acts in their schools and universities? These children often come from violent households where they developed traumatic memories. These individual and collective elements of memory are what interest me. I am deeply interested in the psychiatric aspects of catastrophes.

The canvases in themselves are meant to resemble human skin. I use oil and cold wax in most of the paintings of this exhibit because cold wax has a constant humidity and a constant movement. It thus has characteristics that are very similar to human skin, it is fragile and traumas affect it greatly.



CRISTIN TIERNEY

AMA-JG: *It is a tremendous coincidence that you were present during both the attacks of the Palacio de la Moneda in Santiago de Chile during September 11, 1973, as well as during the attacks of the Twin Towers in New York during September 11, 2001. In your opinion, what are the commonalities between these two events and what binds the different pieces which have been inspired by these events in "Hidden Identities"?*

Jorge: These events are very different in that they were triggered by different motivations; however, both share universal themes. The Palacio de la Moneda was attacked during the Cold War, an international conflict in which both the United States and Russia were involved. Both of these nations were concerned with Chilean politics at the time. Hence, what happened in Chile was greatly influenced by international politics. The 9-11 attacks were also deeply influenced by international politics. It was not just a bilateral issue between the United States and extremism originated in the Arab world, there were many other countries involved in the ongoing tensions that led to these events. Countries such as France have also been stricken by multiple terrorist attacks. People are often not conscious of this because they have the possibility of distancing themselves from events which take place across the world, such as the war in Syria or the violent conflict in Gaza. They often have the possibility of isolating themselves from these issues of international politics.

What is more, both of these events have left marks on individual and collective memories, which will bring forth other consequences tomorrow. This comes back to our conversation about trauma and memory. Chile has not yet healed from the events that took place in 1973. The pain and suffering from those events are still in the memory of Chileans. This applies to the attacks of 2001 in New York as well. What happened during September 11 is still very present in the city. There are still security officers in many of its train stations. There are daily threats in New York. Every time you cross a bridge or go through a tunnel you are thinking about it. All of these events take particular spaces in memories, which impact many people psychologically. These memories are very hard to delete for people who are attempting to go on living without anxiety or panic.

It can thus be said, that I have adopted a futuristic view. I am aware that just like these past attacks, the current attacks in places like Syria and Gaza will have other repercussions later on.

(Note: The interview with the artist was conducted by Jessica Gesund on October 21st, the day before the opening of "Hidden Identities" at OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas)