

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Art in America

Scenes of Unrest: Jorge Tacla at Cristin Tierney

By Ara H. Merjian

October 20, 2022 2:23pm



Jorge Tacla: *Identidad Oculta 160* (detail), 2021, oil and cold wax on canvas, 40 by 30 inches.
COURTESY CRISTIN TIERNEY GALLERY, NEW YORK

Facing visitors as they arrive at this small but striking exhibition of work by [Jorge Tacla](#) is a painting of a large plinth, bereft of its celebrated subject. A pair of spectral gray smears rise from the plinth—at whose sprawling base the viewer is placed perspectively—as if in vague allusion to that absence. With its neobaroque adornments agitated by the artist's characteristically blurred brushwork, part of his cold wax technique, the monument offers no clue as to its precise location. The painting's title, *Identidad Oculta 160* (*Hidden Identity 160*, 2021), confirms that anonymity. But even in its solitude and the generic blue of its sky, the site is hardly unmoored from actuality.

Across one step of the structure's foundation appears the word lives, barely discernible amid other, illegible graffiti scrawls, but rendering the pedestal immediately recognizable—not as any specific site, but as part of the worldwide demonstrations demanding justice for ongoing police violence against Black bodies; this is a makeshift monument to brutality all too widespread. The vacant pedestal likewise conjures the ongoing discourse (to euphemize its frequent vitriol) about the removal of statues of white supremacists and slave owners. Tacla uses a finely honed combination of linework and color washes to create blurred and turbulent surfaces—a formal quality that underscores the ideological tenor of his imagery. The relentless roiling of his paintings imparts on even the most seemingly inert matter a sense of historical urgency. If bodies are absent from *Identidad Oculta 160*, they comprise the sole subject of *Injury Report 22* (2022). With eyes blindfolded, fists clenched, and mouths open—presumably in collective chant—a group of women marches in the open air in what can only be a political protest, conducted in a public space, presumably urban, given the faint outlines of buildings in the background. Despite the ominous deep-red sky, no injuries are visible. But the image's sense of imminent violence erupts in *Injury Report 17* (2022). Sprawled on the ground in a more compact and shallow space, one figure is either helped to his feet or pushed down. Other indistinct figures surround him, one of whom reaches out an arm in either aid or aggression. Verging on abstraction, the striated tumult of bodies is further blurred by dripping, crimson pigment, at once immanent to the scene and also a pictorial event pooling atop the painting's surface. The canvas itself seems a bleeding casualty of the same demonstration.



Jorge Tacla: *Injury Report 22*, 2022, oil and cold wax on canvas, 30 by 40 inches. COURTESY CRISTIN TIERNEY GALLERY, NEW YORK

While those works are still generalized, images like *October 25 #4, 2019* and *October 25 #5, 2019* (both 2022) invoke through their titles recent episodes in the political life of the artist's native Chile, with demonstrating crowds, still entirely anonymous, forming the images' raw formal material. The latter divides its multitudes into six large monochrome sections surrounding a central rectangle of vivid red: an architectural sketch of a street lined by buildings, perhaps depicting a site of unrest. The former work melds bodies and cityscape: a monument at the painting's core appears engulfed by flags and bodies that have wrested its historical importance to their own ends. The flags appear as illegible as the locale is nondescript. October 25 is the date of one of the largest mass demonstrations in Chile's history, which unfolded in Santiago in 2019 in response to mounting living costs and social inequality, yet the scenes' imprecision links them to wider, contemporary global protests (like the Black Lives Matter demonstrations to which his other images allude). The expressly muddled faces and bodies in Tacla's paintings create the distance one expects from a memory or dream; their studied imprecision inflects their presence with the fugitive temporality of ruins. The artist does not appear to take sides per se. But the fact of these demonstrations, the commingling of bodies in space agitating for change, bespeaks a vital human need, one increasingly threatened. And the selection of events to which his titles refer, among them the Beirut explosion in 2020 (in a set of paintings not on view here), indicates a sociopolitical orientation.



Jorge Tacla: *Injury Report 16*, 2022, oil and cold wax on canvas, 49 by 71½ inches.
COURTESY CRISTIN TIERNEY GALLERY, NEW YORK

Even more striking than the artist's expressly civic images are those cityscapes evacuated of identifiable human presence but charged with its effects. The United States Capitol looms at an oblique angle in *Injury Report 16* (2022), in plain allusion to the insurrection of January 6, 2021. Its nondescript buildings awash in a uniform ashy red, *Identidad Occulta 163* (2022) suggests, with smoke or fire billowing from a burning central edifice, some unidentified country gripped by political unrest. In lieu of his usual wax and pigments the artist has added marble powder here, which lends the paint more substance and an eerily material gravity. That the conceptual space between the sites Tacla names—the beacon of Western democracy and “freedom,” the foreign shores where America has sponsored illegitimate coups, and the monuments closer to home where an acute lack of freedom is named—has shrunk so drastically underscores the ghastly predicament of populist politics. Such is the subtle achievement of Tacla's painting: with this show he confirms his presence among those few contemporary figurative painters, from the late Juan Genovés to Julie Mehretu, still worthy of the title “history painter.”