

CRISTIN TIERNEY



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

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## Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship

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AUGUST 7, 2023  
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*We are 5,000, here in this little corner  
of the city.  
How many are we in all the cities of the  
world?  
All of us, our eyes fixed on death.  
How terrifying is the face of Fascism  
For them, blood is a medal,  
carnage is a heroic gesture.*

*Song, I cannot sing you well  
When I must sing out of fear.  
When I am dying of fright.  
When I find myself in these endless  
moments.  
Where silence and cries are the echoes  
of my song.*

— Lines written by Chilean artist and political activist Victor Jara before being tortured, his hands chopped with an axe, and murdered by Augusto Pinochet's military henchmen in September 1973 at a stadium holding thousands of people rounded up by the Junta, his body thrown out into the streets of Santiago.

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I spent several weeks in Chile some 18 months after that fateful date, traveling from Bolivia through the breathtaking, stark beauty of the Atacama desert of the north with its abandoned nitrate — and open-pit copper mines monopolized by British and later American capital. I stayed in Santiago for a while, where bullet holes remained in plain, demonstrative view, riddling the presidential palace, La Moneda, where the democratically elected, socialist President Salvador Allende had been killed during Pinochet's coup d'état.

I knew of the violence of the new regime, which was fully supported by American industrial giant I.T.T. and the CIA (U.S. banks also extended more than \$150 million in short-term credits to Chile, and the Pentagon sold it 52 jet fighter and combat support planes in those 18 months) but had no clue to its extent. Today's officially recognized number of victims of the Junta — people killed, tortured or imprisoned for political reasons — is 40,018. That might not even account for the many "disappeared," thrown out of helicopters into the sea.

Military officers responsible for Jara's murder were finally sentenced to 15 years in prison, in 2018, almost half a century later. Slow moving wheels of justice and all that. Barely anyone talked to me in 1975, much less about politics: The country seemed frozen in shock or fear, and a nightly curfew was still in place.



*Jorge Tacla, "Injury Report/ Informe de lesiones," HD film, 4:25 (2016 – 2023).  
Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery.*

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Although the days of the Junta are over, Chile is under duress in other ways, equally threatening to its population, particularly the working class and the indigenous folks exposed to the consequences of mining. A United Nations report from two months ago states that Chile faces a daunting series of interconnected environmental crises that violate human rights, including the fundamental right to live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

The country is particularly exposed to the effects of the climate crisis: It is among the 20 nations with the highest level of water stress in the world. Droughts and water pollution around lithium mining are intense: Lithium is a major export and subject to fierce struggles over ownership, bringing an unprecedented 1.5 million people out into the streets to protest for environmental justice four years ago.

All this as an introduction to Chilean artist Jorge Tacla and his work (his list of many achievements is found in the link), on view in Beaverton at the Patricia Reser Center for the Arts, in partnership with Converge 45.

The local arts organization, comprised of art professionals and business leaders, starts its Biennial officially on August 24, 2023. Planned are 15 exhibitions by international and American artists across multiple venues, tackling, as the organizers put it, *“how art interacts with global power shifts in contemporary society, including how art is at the vanguard of societal redefinition and shifts towards more participatory culture.”* Watch for more reviews by various writers on ArtsWatch in weeks to come, covering a wide spectrum of the shows.

The list of artist names — I have obviously not yet seen much of the work itself for the upcoming Biennial — suggests a surprising and challenging curation by art critic and author Christian Viveros-Fauné.

## I. JORGE TACLA: STAGINGS/ESCENARIOS

At a time when the wagons are circled, and exclusionary nationalism (and worse ideological forces) once again raise their ugly heads in so many of the countries we thought were steadfast democracies, a transnational approach to art is certainly important. Knowledge of an artist's background, temporally, geographically and culturally, might help us to gain a greater understanding if not appreciation of his work, which is surely affected by specific experiential pressures.

Tacla came of age in Chile during the time of the military coup and left the country for the United States in 1981, these days sharing his time between New York City and Santiago, Chile. Add to that his Syrian and Palestinian ancestry — peoples exposed to inordinate amounts of suffering and oppression across their histories — and a heightened sensibility for abuses of power and the consequences of displacement is to be expected. That sensibility indeed influenced the contents of his work that I encountered at The Reser, in an exhibition titled *Stagings/Escenarios*.



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Three exhibits of his work are on view: a video, *Injury Report/ Informe de lesiones*, that relates to the book-burnings by the Chilean Junta, a timely reminder for us in our own country that the step from banning to burning is but a short one, once autocratic power is fully unleashed; and two paintings. One painting is extraordinarily large, displayed on wooden structures that make it look like a billboard. The other is traditionally hung. *Staging*, rather than scenarios, feels like an aptly chosen title for the show, given the way the paintings dramatize catastrophe.



*Jorge Tacla Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 60, (Detail) (20121) Oil and cold wax on canvas. Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery*

*Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 60* (offered with an instruction: interpretation left to the viewer) depicts an interior view of a room that could be a tiled kitchen transformed into a provisional field hospital, or a torture chamber, constructed with hastily thrown-together cinderblocks.

Central is a kind of operating table, with a side shelf of medical-looking instruments and tinctures, surrounded by amorphous forms that could be shackles or handcuffs, under a

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hovering cloud of markings that resemble musical notes, the echoes of resounding screams, or, alternatively, buzzing insects attracted by the remnants of bodily fluids.

The one unambiguous representation in this monochromatic web of hints and suggestions is the visual anchor of a patch of blood, with a few tiny splashes detectable here or there. It steers our attention to the *subjective suffering* of a human being, whether harmed in situ or patched back together on a make-shift bed, creating empathy, but also narrowing our focus to victimhood. It forces a gruesome vision of physical harm, drawing us into the literal as well as metaphorical darkness of that chamber. Not much room for interpretation, frankly, if a puddle of blood gets visual place of honor.



Jorge Tacla, “Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 60,” details (20121). Oil and cold wax on canvas. Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery.

The larger painting, *Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 34*, displays a panoramic view of collective suffering rather than honing in on a singular imagined body under duress. A frontal view of city blocks bombed to shreds evokes the real-life catastrophe of the siege of the Syrian city of Homs, where a three-year-long battle between the military and oppositional forces a decade ago led to indescribable acts of barbarism by Assad’s henchmen, until the rebels withdrew and the government took hold.



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*Jorge Tacla, "Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 34," (2018). Oil and cold wax on canvas. Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery.*

It is a truly interesting painting, despite flirting at times with clichéd ambiguity: Are the pinks and coral hints at the horizon a hopeful sign of dawn, or are they the glow of still smoldering fires? Are the wispy clouds testimony to an indifferent nature, or plumes of smoke?



*Jorge Tacla, "Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 34," detail (2018). Oil and cold wax on canvas. Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery.*

What made it fascinating to me is the subversive use of columnar arrangements, spatial divisions by means of subtle changes in coloration, vertical lines and actual, distinct columns that overlap on some of the four panels that comprise the entirety of the painting. The columns are enclosed in an unending repetition of violently destroyed human habitat.

Columns and repetition were a device of what art historian Meyer Schapiro called "*despotic art*," or arts of power, starting with baroque displays of endless columns in churches and cloisters, or colonial architecture in Egypt and India, government buildings with porticos, down to the mass-media presentation of his time, then the 1930s, in the new medium of photography, capturing hangars filled with rows of airplanes, or military divisions marching en bloc.

Tacla is turning the table, using those elements from the perspective of the displaced, rather than that of the abusive forces: The repetition of block after block of unmitigated destruction induces horror rather than awe. In its cityscape expansiveness it calls to mind a 19th century painting of another hell, by John Martin — note the columnar



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repetition of the government buildings or an imaginary reconstruction of cities of antiquity.



Jorge Tacla, “*Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 34*,” details (2018). Oil and cold wax on canvas. Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery



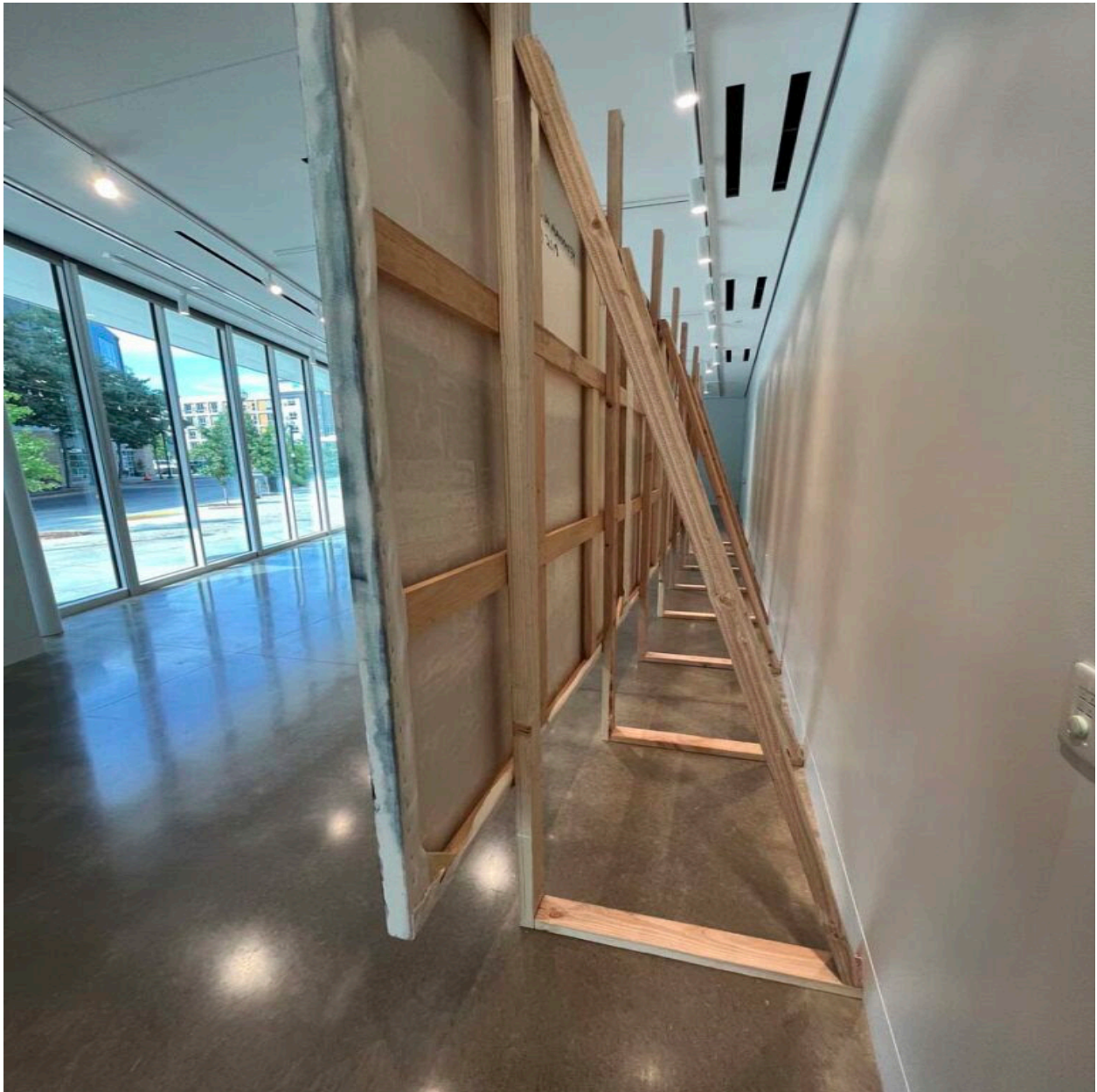
John Martin, “*Pandemonium*” (1841). Oil on canvas, 123 x 185 cm. Louvre, Paris. Based on John Milton’s “*Paradise Lost*,” where Pandemonium is the capital of Hell.



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The billboard-like staging reminded me of the billboards seen on many commuter roads, displaying advertisement for (sub)urban neighborhoods: You'd be home now, if you lived here! Well, you'd be dead now, if you lived here, in Homs.

The association includes something of a dialectic, of course. Being reminded of the price of violent political conflict might make you aware of the gathering darkness around us, or create empathy for refugees facing a watery Mediterranean grave during their flight. But the reassurance of not living "there," after all, allows us a distancing from those far-away places where genocide happens, enacted by "foreign barbarians," promoting a false sense of security on our own shores.



Holding it up: the structure from behind.

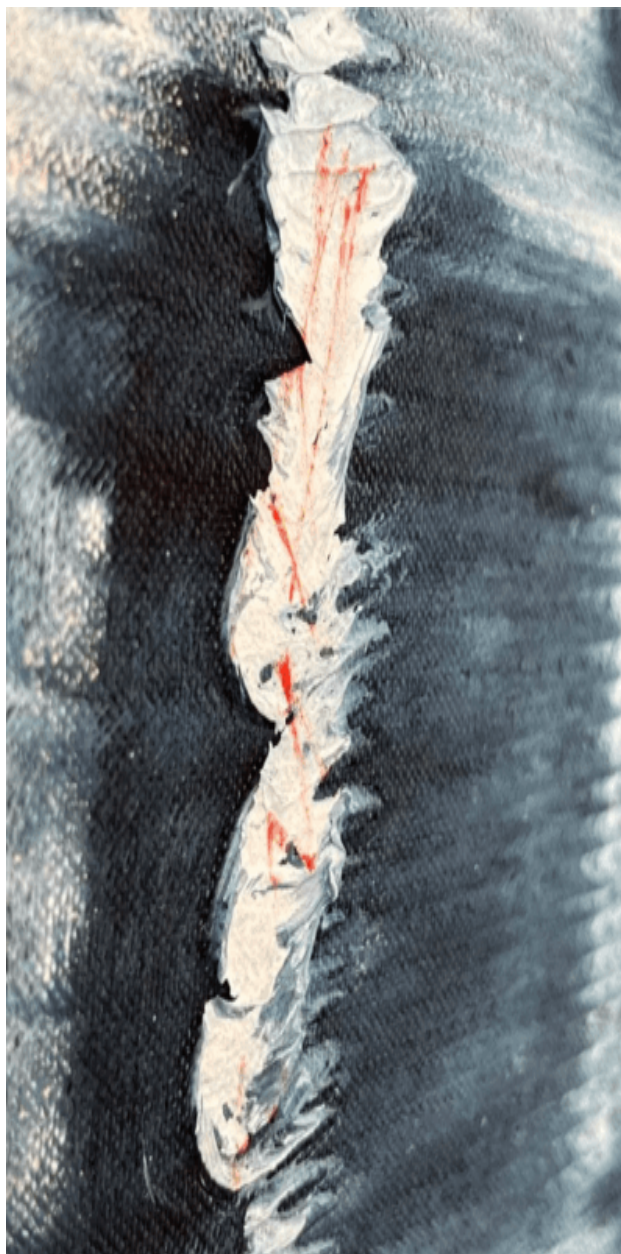
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The use of cold wax mixed with the oil paints adds to the unnerving feeling caused by the staging. It allows a manipulation of transparency, and so some of what I saw resembled the haze when you look through tears, if not through the dust that gets whipped up when buildings crumble. It also adds body and allows layering; on close inspection, the painting shows scars or buckled skin, as if skin is ripped off or has burnt to the point of melting. The association to skin really was the only direct — and shattering — link to the representation of human beings, rather than architectural ruins.





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Jorge Tacla, “*Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 34*,” details (2018). Oil and cold wax on canvas. Courtesy of Cristin Tierney Gallery.

I cannot help but wonder how thick-skinned the artist himself must be to make it as a wanderer between worlds, like any displaced person never quite belonging to either the old or the new. An early New York Times review doubted his ability to reach high ground as a painter. That didn’t age well. Psychoanalytically absorbed reviewers attest him a profound death anxiety — I guess I’m with Maslow here: “When the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” including the aesthetics of destruction as a symbol for one’s psyche to acolytes of psychoanalysis.

Critics attacked his monumental work at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, a series of plates that memorialized the place of Jara’s murder and is inscribed



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with his name — *Al mismo tiempo, en el mismo lugar* (At The Same Time, in The Same Place), 2010 — as too focused on the individual, particularly when the individual in question devoted his life to collective power.

The paintings on view at The Reser suggest to me something quite different, independent of my admiration of the technical prowess to create these monumental constructions and the artist's resilience when reenacting suffering in the process of painting. In some ways they bear witness, questioning the relationship between the aesthetic and the social, particularly the violence so ubiquitous in our world. Like all good political art, they want us to consider how we bear or enable or resist social imperatives that are associated with power and its requisite tools.

Does art manage to shape our historical thinking, and does its form help us reconfigure our assumptions about the present? Can works of political art ultimately achieve change of a kind, beyond providing a contemporary label that soothes buyers' conscience by making them feel "progressive," sort of an art-washing for the soul of the (neo)liberal collector? I will turn to that question in a bit. Before we get there, let me introduce the other two artists on display at The Reser.

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"A successful work of art is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and un-compromised, in its innermost structure."

— **Theodor W. Adorno**, *Essays on Music*

The quote by Adorno, though focused on modern music, could equally well be applied to curation. Curation is hard and often does not get the attention and appreciation it deserves, particularly when uncompromising. If you are a renowned curator charged with constructing large assemblies of artists, you have to balance your ideas and concepts with the interests of the organizing institutions, which have partially mercantilistic aspirations. Biennials, art fairs and the like do infuse a place with economic activity, after all.

You might also face an embarrassment of riches — *die Qual der Wahl* is the German phrase, the torture of choice — with regard to the number of artists at your disposal, amongst whom you have to pick and choose, avoiding the dreaded commodification, pushing an important concept and protecting the state of your reputation simultaneously.

If you are a local curator, no matter how talented, your choices are often somewhat restricted. If you have to combine the available work with that of heavy hitters (and I consider Tacla in that category) how do you protect the other artists from being overshadowed (no matter how good they might be, they are still less known) unless you believe in clichés like "A rising tide lifts all ships?"

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I don't know the answer, but there are two comforting thoughts: for one, these lesser-known artists will get exposure; that potentially opens up a larger circle of viewers eventually if the quality of the art holds its own. More importantly, in my view, is that a public confronted with art that is not yet labeled as awe-inspiring or famous will find it much more approachable, opening interest in art in general. It might be an inspiration to listen to one's own creative impulses, or an encouragement that early or mid-career work deserves representation.

That said, the work of both artists that The Reser curator Karen de Benedetti picked, again showing her sensitivity for pairings as in previous shows that I reviewed, will reward viewers' scrutiny. (Malia Jensen's sculpture was not yet present when I visited.)