

## GALLERIES SKETCHES

## ALTERED STATES

**"Hidden Identities:  
Paintings and Drawings  
by Jorge Tacla"**At Art Museum of the Americas  
to Jan. 31

Jorge Tacla's recent paintings are hard to approach. Literally. The Chilean artist's experiments in technique are best viewed from close up and at an angle: light washes of color over canvas, passages of impasto where oil mixes with wax, calligraphic waves carved into paint. Yet as with a photomosaic, it's only from a distance that the imagery—mostly buildings, sometimes figures—begins to crystallize.

Both perspectives are critical to "Hidden Identities," Tacla's latest exhibition now on view at the Art Museum of the Americas. The show comprises a few dozen paintings in oil and cold wax, along with a wall of drawings on notebook paper. The paintings depict buildings, interiors, and people trapped in the dystopian aftermath of some physical or psychic trauma. Structures appear reduced to rubble or bombed out; figures languish in the midst of chaos. Such images may feel acutely familiar to the contemporary eye, but it's Tacla's treatment of materials that challenges our understanding of them.

Born in Santiago in 1958, Tacla grew up during one of the most volatile periods in South American history, when a wave of U.S.-backed military dictatorships seized power through violent coups. In Chile's case, it was in 1973 when General Augusto Pinochet and his military junta instituted a repressive authoritarian regime.

Tacla, who left Santiago for New York in 1981, considers the coup a transformative moment for his life and art, but for the most part he invokes it only indirectly. The works on view instead focus on the universal aspects of trauma and how it can rewire the human psyche. Much of Tacla's imagery comes from photos that he's found or received from friends around the world. The works make reference to contemporary disasters ranging from 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing to airstrikes on civilians in Gaza and the ongoing conflict in Syria.

The resulting cityscapes, mostly modest in size and rendered in a narrow range of blues and grays, have a sketchy, ethereal quality—like blueprints from a dream. Forms emerge from blotches and smudges of color, as if the chance result of some Surrealist experiment. Really, they're the product of Tacla's unusual technique of working the surface of paintings with cold wax. Tacla says he uses wax because it recalls the vulnerability of flesh, evidenced

**"Hidden Identity 27 B"  
by Jorge Tacla, 2012**

in works that often invoke the human body without showing it.

The technique is best observed in "Hidden Identity 59," which presents an aerial view of the Pentagon. A geometric rendering of the building is distorted by waves in oil paint and wax that run vertically across the canvas, disrupting the building's architecture like ripples might a reflection on water. The image points to the precariousness of a national symbol—Tacla notes that he depicted the building in ruins years before 9/11—as well as the malleability of collective memory.

The global conflicts explored in "Hidden Identities" also have a personal dimension for Tacla. Central to this body of work is what he calls "the relationship between victim and aggressor." Take "Hidden Identity 81, 78, 79," a foreboding triptych consisting of a rumpled bed, a portrait of a woman, and a river scene. The work was inspired by Marcia Merino, a Chilean left-wing activist who was captured, tortured, and subsequently became an informant for the secret police. For Tacla, she symbolizes both victim and traitor—a dual identity which trauma made possible.

Tacla's fascination with psychoanalysis also comes out in his "Notebook" series, a grid of 66 works on paper. The drawings are the result of a series of Skype conversations Tacla conducted with an art historian, a psychiatrist, and a philosopher during his Rockefeller Foundation residency in Italy. In them, Tacla undertakes a series of graphic experiments that meld poetry and gesture in a way that recalls exquisite corpse, another Surrealist game.

Still, Tacla's show is a quiet one. Unlike some of the great Southern Cone artists of the previous generation, who took on political violence with bold and subversive conceptual projects, Tacla prefers to be more subtle. The approach here is still potent—the spectacle of devastation as hazy and inescapable as memory.

—Beth Shook