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ART REVIEW | 'THE DISAPPEARED'

## Unresolved Chords Echo for 'the Disappeared'

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

There may have been a more moving show of contemporary political art in the city this season than "The Disappeared" at El Museo del Barrio, but if so, I missed it. The title refers to a peculiarly chilling form of violence associated with political upheavals in Latin America over the last 40 years, one that is now becoming more common in Iraq.

A man leaves for work one morning, but doesn't come home at the end of the day, or later that night, or the next day. A week passes. Relatives suspect that the missing man, who may or may not have had risky political ties, has been arrested or kidnapped. But they don't know by whom, or where he's been taken, or if he's alive or dead.

He's one of the disappeared, "los desaparecidos," the victim of terrorism through stealth removal. A death permits mourning, assignment of blame, a possibility of closure. Disappearance generates uncertainty, paralyzes action, leaves an open wound. If I say nothing, a survivor thinks, maybe my husband, or child, or mother, or wife will be spared, even returned. If I inquire or accuse, I may seal their fate. As often as not, fear wins out.

The 15 artists in the show are all from Latin American countries that experienced totalitarian regimes in the late 20th century, when almost every family had friends who disappeared or were themselves forced into hiding or exile. Directly or indirectly, their art is about these experiences.

Some of it is explicitly autobiographical. Nicolás Guagnini's father, a leftist journalist in Buenos Aires, vanished in 1977, when the artist was 11, at the beginning of a period that saw the disappearance, torture and death of some 30,000 of his countrymen. Mr. Guagnini, who now lives in New York, where he is a co-founder of the artist-run Orchard gallery on the Lower East Side, has made a single sculpture about his missing parent: a cluster of upright posts on which his father's portrait is painted in fragments so that the face comes into focus, then dissolves, as the viewer circles the piece.

A photographic installation by Marcelo Brodsky, who is also from Argentina, expands the personal into a larger history. In early family snapshots, he is a child playing with his older brother, Fernando. In a 1967 group portrait of his eighth-grade class, he has circled 13 of the 32 figures, to indicate friends who as adults would go into political exile or disappear.

Fernando appears again, and for the last time, in a 1979 picture, taken in a military prison were

he was jailed as a dissident and, Mr. Brodsky believes, murdered. In the late 1990s, the artist organized a memorial for all of these people from his past. It included a public reading of their names. The reading was recorded on video; the names sound through El Museo's galleries.

Other work in the show is less diaristic, more about the facts of violence made visible. Sara Maneiro shows enlargements of X-rayed dental remains recovered from a mass grave of protesters massacred by government troops in Venezuela.

Iván Navarro, the youngest artist here, born in 1972, contributes a ladder made from fluorescent light tubes and printed with the names of Chilean police and secret service personnel indicted for torturing or killing fellow citizens. Arturo Duclos has covered a gallery wall with the outlined form of the Chilean flag made from human bones he collected over the years from medical students and other donors.

Fernando Traverso, an activist based in Rosario, Argentina, keeps the memory of dead friends alive by surreptitiously stenciling images of bicycles on city walls. Bicycles, hard to identify and easy to hide, were the favored mode of transportation for resistance fighters. When a bike was found abandoned, it usually meant its owner had been captured. Thanks to Mr. Traverso, there are still bikes in Rosario awaiting their riders' return.

Not all the art is so specific in its references. Juan Manuel Echavarría, from Colombia, symbolically suggests the pathology of disappearance in photographs of a weathered mannequin displayed like a body on an autopsy table. In photographs by the Uruguayan-born Ana Tiscornia, newsprint portraits are half- obscured behind what looks like a coat of yellow slime. In several small videos, Oscar Muñoz paints similar portraits with water on light-colored stone; within seconds the water dries and the faces vanish.

No single work is more complex than "From the Uruguayan Torture Series" (1983) by Luis Camnitzer, an artist born in Germany, raised in Uruguay and for the last several decades an influential teacher and writer in New York. Combining close-up photographs of his own body with handwritten sentence fragments, he evokes the sensibilities of both tormenter and victim with corrosive subtlety.

Mr. Camnitzer is one of our finest political artists, which is to say one of our finest artists. Nothing he has done demonstrates this more persuasively than this devastating exercise in psychological portraiture, which is also self-portraiture.

Portraiture is, of course, an art form expressly designed to resist oblivion. And it is the essence of this show, which opens with a floor-to-ceiling spread of monotype memorial portraits by Antonio Frasconi, born in Buenos Aires in 1919, and concludes with an extraordinary portrait project called "Identity" by a collective of Argentine artists who use that word as their name.

Collaborating with the Association of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, women who have

for years publicly demonstrated against government silence on disappearances, the collective has gathered photographs of couples who had children, or were expecting children, at the time they vanished. The installation, continually being added to, has been exhibited in Buenos Aires. The hope is that if any of those children, who would now be adults, survived, they might recognize the face of a lost parent and be reunited with living family members.

Whatever its practical results may be, it gives an overpowering sense of the sheer statistical enormity of loss. You think you've reached the end; you turn a corner and find more. It goes on and on, face after face, out of the gallery, down the hall.

This all may seem long ago and far away to us, but every Thursday in Buenos Aires, groups of women continue to hold their protests demanding a full accounting of their children's fates.

"The Disappeared" was organized by Laurel Reuter, founding director and chief curator of the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks. It is scheduled to travel through North and South America for three years, and has a bilingual catalog that is a work of art in itself. From Ms. Reuter's stunning essay to the supplementary material, it is a total- immersion emotional experience.

And why is it that an on-the-road exhibition from a small museum in the Midwest is the most potent show of contemporary art, political or otherwise, in town? All I can say is that curators in our local museums should pay a visit, and ask themselves that question.

*"The Disappeared" ("Los Desaparecidos") continues through June 17 at El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem; (212) 831-7272, [elmuseo.org](http://elmuseo.org).*

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