

TAKING THE WAR OUT OF ABSTRACTION

A Conversation Ana Tiscornia - Juan Manuel Echavarría

In March 2007, the Casa de la Cultura in the town of La Ceja, Antioquia, had a small exhibit¹ of paintings by victims of the Colombian armed conflict and by ex-combatants of the paramilitary forces of Colombia, who demobilized under the Ley de Justicia y Paz.² Juan Manuel Echavarría went to the Art Show and became interested in the paintings, which gave him the idea that this was a project worth exploring. He had a strong feeling that therein laid a subject that contained key ideas that deserved to be further developed. The paintings at that point, were only timid war testimonies, which is why he decided to drive this project forward. The conversation that follows is about this process which began with a visit to the exhibit and lasted for over two years.

AT- Did it strike you, from the very first time you saw the art exhibit, that those painted testimonies might be of historical value?

JME- It was clear to me that there was a possibility here for developing a project. I went to the show with a friend who is an anthropologist and she inquired about the possibility

of interviewing some paramilitary ex-combatants. We went to the show in the morning and by that same afternoon we had been granted interviews with three of them. . . . The exhibit in La Ceja was my first encounter with paintings that showed real life war experiences, so I asked the ex-combatants if they would be interested in painting more of these war experiences. The first workshop grew out of this initial impulse.

Four years ago, with the proceeds of my artwork, I created a Foundation in Colombia, for educational projects. The show at the Casa de la Cultura in La Ceja, led me to think that the Foundation should set up a program to preserve the memory of the war in Colombia, through artistic projects.

AT- How did you start?

JME- I spoke openly to them of my work as an artist, what I did, and why I did it, of my belief that art can create memory and make people think. I asked them if they would be interested in painting more war memories and exhibiting them.

AT- Why ask the paramilitaries and not the victims?

JME- The victims have always been present in my work. . . . However, I felt the need to get to know the actors of the war. In 2001 I did a visual and audio project with seven women who had been kidnapped from a church in Cali, called La María.³ After this project I felt a strong desire to get to know the stories of the guerrilla combatants who had carried out the kidnapping and had held the women hostage. This is how I became interested in hearing the story from the other side.

When 30.000 rank and file paramilitary combatants demobilized in 2005 under the Ley de Justicia y Paz, they came from all over the country to government-run hostels in Bogotá. I often walked passed one of these hostels in the Teusaquillo neighborhood. On seeing the ex-paramilitaries I realized I had never spoken to any of them, nor had I ever heard their stories, and wondered what their war experiences had been like, how they felt about them and what kind of memories were still circulating through their minds.

I thought about all of this when I walked into la Casa de la Cultura de La Ceja. That is when this door opened up for me.

1 Memoria pintada: Los colores de la verdad (Painted Memory: The Colors of Truth), 2007. Casa de la Cultura, La Ceja, Antioquia, Colombia. This project was sponsored by Conciudadanía, an organization that provides consulting and training services for social actors.

2 The Ley de Justicia y Paz (Law 975 of 2005) was implemented by Álvaro Uribe Vélez's government and approved by the Colombian Congress as a legal framework to regulate the demobilization of paramilitaries in Colombia. It may eventually serve as a demobilization process for guerrilla groups, but the FARC guerrillas have yet to sign a disarmament agreement.

3 La María, 2000/2001, was shown for the first time in the exhibition: La María y otras series in the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia, 2003, Cali, Colombia.

AT- How did you go from those first three ex-combatants to getting involved with 80?⁴

JME- Well... Those first paramilitaries brought others into the project, all of them rank and file combatants, because that was my condition. As the workshop progressed it became obvious that it could not be limited to ex-paramilitary members alone. I felt that in order to make this project more meaningful, it would be important to include other ex-combatants from other groups.

Through the Alcaldía de Bogotá, I was introduced to former guerrilla members who were participating in a City program for ex-combatants who deserted from guerrilla groups and ended up in Bogotá. I took my idea to a group of ex-guerrillas who were enrolled in the program and invited them to participate in the workshops. Approximately 40 men showed up for the first workshop.

AT- The workshops were voluntary, of course.

JME- Yes, they were voluntary.

AT- And what about the Colombian Army Soldiers? How did you find them?

JME- I knew I wanted to include soldiers from the Army, but I did not know how to go about finding them, until I realized that all of those soldiers that had been wounded in battle, were demobilized soldiers. So I went to the Batallón de Sanidad

in Bogotá to meet them and invite them to participate in the workshops.

AT- Why did you insist they be rank and file soldiers?

JME- The voice of these soldiers is seldom heard; for me it was a distant voice and it was their voice that beckoned me, not the voice of the war ideologists. I wanted to understand how these young men felt and thought about the war they had fought in. During the workshops I asked them to educate me about what the war was like from the inside. I wanted to know what they had lived through, how they became part of this war, what their feelings were about it. I was always interested in hearing their personal stories.

AT- You held another workshop for women.

JME- Yes. I felt the women in the war were not being represented, and it is interesting to note that although I tried to make contact with women from both groups—since there are also paramilitary women—I was only able to make contact with guerrilla female ex-combatants.

AT- I visited one of the women's workshops and found four or five ex-guerrilla members painting alongside a woman who was married to a paramilitary ex-combatant... I remember asking if sexual abuse was common in the war and they began to speak very timidly about it, but in

their paintings, this subject comes through with a great deal of force.

JME- Indeed, several paintings depict rapes and forced abortions. These representations show the dehumanization, the obliteration of all that is human in the war camps. The paintings that are created from within these war camps, bear witness to a reality that most Colombians are not aware of.

AT- Of course there are no chroniclers in this war. The ex-combatants became their own chroniclers. What is most interesting is that in these chronicles one thing that is constant, is the fact that peasants are portrayed as victims of this war.

JME- Yes, the ex-combatants could have simply painted combat scenes and nothing else. It would have been easier for them, I think. But they felt an emotional need to speak of their victims, of the peasants who suffer most from the barbarity of the war.

AT- Who are these combatants? Where do they come from?

JME- All of these ex-combatants who participated in the workshops are also peasants. Many of them come from the departments of Putumayo, Nariño, and Caquetá, where the Farc grew roots as an irregular army a long time ago. To join the guerrilla in the department of Caquetá was the "normal" thing to do since there has been guerrilla presence there since the

4 Seventeen ex-paramilitaries from the Auc (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) participated in the workshops, thirty ex-guerrillas from the Farc (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), one from the Eln (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), fourteen female ex-guerrillas from the Farc, and eighteen demobilized soldiers from the Colombian Army. They produced over 400 paintings.

beginning of the 60's; so what young men were doing in that context was simply joining "their army."

In these southern parts of the country, there are large coca leaf plantations: The peasants farm them and the Farc buy the product. On perceiving this, the paramilitary groups did not hesitate and came into the region in full force. They fought ruthlessly to gain control of the coca leaf crops. This region has been extensively sprayed by the Colombian Government in the last few years, and there is currently strong presence of the Colombian State in the area.

Many of the painters come from the southern regions of Colombia. It was only through the workshops that I came to meet people from the department of Putumayo and Caquetá, for the first time. These are very isolated, remote and jungle-like regions, where drug traffickers are ever present.

AT- The young men and women from this area that participated in the workshops. . . did they belong to paramilitary or to guerrilla groups?

JME- The ex-guerrilla members that participated in the art workshops, come from southern Colombia. The paramilitary ex-combatants come from eastern Antioquia. These two areas differ a great deal from a cultural and geographical point of view.

The workshop participants of the Ejército Nacional de Colombia, on the other hand, come from all regions of the country.

AT- Why do these young men join the paramilitary groups?

JME- As I previously explained, there are young peasants who join the guerrilla because it was just the thing to do in their region. Some would explain their predicament by saying, "I joined the guerrilla, because my father was in the guerrilla, or my uncle, or brother or grandfather." Likewise, there are some that will confess to having joined paramilitary groups because their members would ride into town in fancy cars, powerful motorcycles, wearing gold chains, in the company of attractive women and would be seen drinking expensive alcoholic beverages. This, coupled with an attractive wage offer, lured them into joining. There were also some that joined either side to seek revenge, since the opposite group had killed a member of their family.

AT- This is paradoxical: Those seeking revenge join because of their family ties to one of the victims. So under these circumstances victims and victimizers become intertwined.

In which category would you place those who joined the guerrilla or the paramilitary groups because they witnessed the murder of their father who was a civilian peasant?

We are talking of a victim turned victimizer. . . which is one aspect, but there are others, that may lead to the conclusion that behind a victimizer there is almost always a victim in a previous circumstance.

JME- Yes, some of them saw their father or mother or brother or sister get murdered. . . It was revenge that drove them to join.

Most of them are very young; these are boys and girls who join the rebel groups at a very young age.

AT- This brings to mind another topic which we see in the paintings: the recruitment of children. I am thinking about a very young boy in uniform who drew a picture of himself in the middle of the town square. . .

JME- One can see recruitment and forced recruitment of children in some of their paintings. In others one can see the killing of parents who try to defend their children from being recruited.



AT- How far were these narratives made possible because they were being painted?

JME- These painted narratives were revealed through the workshops. There had to be a process in place to establish trust amongst the participants. We talked, but mostly listened a great deal. Nobody was taught to paint. We only gave them the working

Workshop. 2008

materials. The method we proposed, as workshop directors, was to use 50 X 35 centimeter wooden boards. Each participant received as many wooden boards as they wanted, so that they could put their stories together as if they were working with the pieces of a puzzle.

We talked about how important it was for this country to see the truth from within, to try and understand how all these events came to happen and why they are still happening. We talked about how these paintings can educate against the war. It was through the brush strokes that their stories were told and through their paintings that these young men and women were able to rescue their memories.

AT- It is strange to imagine ex-combatants painting. How did this process get started?

JME- It started at the paramilitary art exhibit in La Ceja. I was right there, in the midst of their paintings; I felt I could be open and forthright with them. So I asked them if they would like to paint their memories and their experiences. With ex-guerrilla members, the workshops had quite a different start. They began by painting childhood memories. The same is true for the Colombian Army soldiers who had been wounded and for the female ex-combatants at a later stage. After their childhood memories, came their war memories. Every time I asked them if they would allow their paintings to

be shown to the public, they said they would like that very much: They were quite amazed at how well they could communicate their experiences through them. They could hardly believe the impact they were having.

It was also important for them to understand that nobody at the workshop was there to judge them. There were three of us directing the workshops. Fernando Grisalez, Noel Palacios and myself.

Together we were able to create an open space, where there was trust and ongoing dialogue with the workshop participants.

AT- When observing the paintings it is easy to imagine that they would have therapeutic value for the authors. But I believe this was not your objective.

JME- No, I am not a therapist, but I was very happy to see how these young men and women, through painting, were able to tell their stories, which they would not have been able to tell otherwise.

I would always ask them what they felt while painting, and they would answer that the paintings had provided a great outlet, and had allowed them to vent stories they had never been able to talk about before.

AT- What was going through your mind amidst this process? I would think you were often surprised by all that was taking place?

JME- From the very beginning I understood the significance of the narrative in their artwork. I could see the importance it had for historical memory. I was always surprised by the force and the sincerity of the paintings. Even though the stories that were unfolding were quite brutal, the workshop directors were always careful not to make comments about the theme of their paintings. Our interest was to get to know what lay behind each one of their stories and to try and understand what made them get involved in the war. Painting was the means which allowed them to depict the war horrors. For me these paintings were a way to gain more knowledge on the conflict: They revealed many untold stories of the war, and the unimaginable horrors that so many Colombians have never acknowledged. These crimes can never be justified. . . . And I wonder how we ever allowed this war to go so far, this cruelty to get out of hand and these cycles of violence to unfold one after another.

AT- So what is your conclusion?

JME- What happened is due to our huge indifference, the poor knowledge we have about our country, and the lack of presence of the Colombian State in some parts of our national territory. . . . "Far from the eyes. . . far from the heart," the saying goes. We have been numbed by news which are given out repet-

itively... So many massacres... how would one more move us... So many kidnappings, why would one more jolt us...

Compassion has been lost in our country.

The outcome of this project moved me very deeply. It showed me the war with all its cruelty. I realized the depths of horror that human beings can reach in a war context. I felt outrage, repulsion and pain. No other project had ever before made me so aware of the war.

This war must come to an end. Now! Peasants can no longer be the victims of this unreined cruelty...

It is the "deconditioning" of all that is human.

AT- It is true that one learns a great deal from these paintings, that you see things that you never saw before. Something here is intrinsic to the way in which the story is being told. In order to paint a story, you need to delve into its context differently than if told verbally.

A professional story-teller, or an innate one, would probably dwell on the details which surround the story, but in general, if you are telling a story, you tend to focus on the sequence of events, the concrete facts, rather than on the framework of the story. But when you are painting, you have a blank space in front of you which needs to be filled... There is some degree of pressure, which comes out of that blank which

pushes the artist into thinking about the circumstances that surrounded the event he or she is about to paint. This in turn triggers a memory process. I would say something like this happened in the painting workshop...

JME- Yes, I agree. Their paintings unleashed an amazing memory process... The truth in their paintings became evident to me.

AT- And it might be hard to accept that many of them are quite beautiful...

JME- My friend Manolo Vellojín, who is a very good artist and a very acute observer, said to me after seeing the paintings, "The beauty of these paintings lies in the truth they contain."

AT- No doubt, it is that same truth which makes them so important because it turns them into contributions to the history of Colombia. The question is why. Because they are a source of inexcusable realities, which are essential for a better understanding, an understanding as Hannah Arendt put it... of "unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality-whatever it may be."⁵

So the key question in Colombia is what to do with the truth, since in the answer lies the key to building peace.

JME- The truth in Colombia is tangled up, murky and concealed, not easily expressed in words.

AT- Yes, in this case the truth was built through painting which would indicate a word void. What are your expectations for this exhibit?

JME- Will such an exhibit awaken us to reality? Will it rise our awareness of the war? Will it bring us out of our apathy? Can it shake us up and enrage us? Will it create a profound malaise in us? After seeing the exhibit will there be a before and an after?

I would expect the answer to be yes... because the paintings of these ex-combatants are a declaration against war!

AT- Let us accept the fact that this exhibit might be controversial. I say this because so far Colombia has not put the war behind it, it has not yet been committed to the past, and its society is polarized. Hence there is room for much questioning... It is inevitable...

JME- Yes, the exhibit might be controversial, no doubt... but at this point it is not I who must address these questions. The answer lies within the paintings. They speak for themselves.

5 Quoted by Roberto Saviano in *Gomorra: Italy's Other Mafia*, published by Pan Books, 2008.