

I've worked with former combatants during the past twenty years and have no complaints. I've known demobilized members of different groups, from very different parts of the country, of different ages, and of course men and women little more than boys and girls. I've seen them in the midst of anxiety and joy, often roaring with laughter and occasionally bewailing their troubles and sadness. I've visited their homes and embraced their children, I've eaten with them, and on certain occasions we've slept under the same roof. I confess they never cease to surprise me.

Their names, faces and histories now march through my mind: John Edison and his dream of becoming a doctor; Elber and his incredible ability to interpret vallenato rhythms; Damaris and her three children all born in guerrilla dens; Luis's passion for politics, María L.'s eyes; Jorge's lies. . . So many stories to tell!

I also confess that I have often mistrusted these processes of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration; "not all are here, and not all who are here should be;" we still have a long road ahead of us when we speak of cohabitation, peace

and reconciliation; post-conflict is not just around the corner. Certain persons have called me moderately pessimistic with regard to this subject. This may be true, but I have a lot of confidence in human beings, in their ability to take responsibility for their actions, in their commitment if we give them another chance and a helping hand.

How could I not believe, when I myself was part of a military political movement, the M-19, founded in 1974, that demobilized and disarmed in 1990, nearly 20 years ago. Many of my friends also participated, to lesser or greater degrees, in guerrilla organizations that signed peace agreements and disarmed. They all had the sincerest of wills and are now committed to building the Nation, from inside academia, non-governmental organizations, politics, etc. Naturally, this is a different historical moment, a different context and different organizations, in a thousand ways different from the paramilitary groups that have demobilized in recent years, or from the "historic guerrillas" such as the Farc and Eln, also deserted by thousands of combatants in recent years.

In any case, my confidence in the decision of many of these demobilized

combatants in the last seven years to begin the serious process of reintegration into civil society, led me to set up an experiment while I directed the Mayor of Bogotá's demobilization program when Lucho Garzón was in charge of administering the District. I must thank him for this opportunity and, also, for trusting me so I could accomplish things, even the most unexpected of things. The experiment consisted of putting to work, under the same roof and along the same public policy lines, former combatants from the M-19 and the Epl demobilized in the 90s, and former recently demobilized paramilitaries and guerrillas. Many of these so-called "agents of peace" were the true architects and builders of a unique reintegration process in Bogotá.

For four years, not exempt of errors, we proceeded with the reintegration of former combatants based on the belief they were citizens with rights as well as responsibilities with regard to the city and other citizens, while also believing the citizenry deserved to have their rights respected and that the presence of demobilized combatants must not affect their lives negatively. It isn't easy to do this

under the current circumstances where the victims number in the thousands and the armed conflict has left serious after-effects, and while there are still not enough measures taken and guarantees of non-repetition.

Something I never accepted was that those in the program be used in “intelligence” missions or that they participate in military operatives against their former companions in arms, whether or not this collaboration led to financial benefit. I’ve always thought this method meant a risk for former combatants, their families and even the communities into which they have reintegrated. I knew of several cases of revenge and retaliation, and suffered more than one headache and bitter discussion with officials for defending the idea of a reintegration process based on civil law and citizenship, far from any situation that might imply the most minimal return to arms, such as employment in private security or intelligence actions. I have continually argued that using demobilized combatants as actors in intelligence or military activities is a way of keeping them in the conflict or preventing their reintegration and return to civilian life. Besides, it discredits the entire process in the eyes of society.

I, on the other hand, have always believed in processes that allow them to grow as humans, to achieve dignity, to prove to other citizens that their reintegration into civilian life is a fact. I am convinced they must be taught

a trade, but also be given adequate spaces in which to participate and appropriate their rights, so they can express themselves and create.

This is why we developed artistic activities with former combatants and members of their families, and in many cases with people from the community. The results were encouraging: musical groups, theatrical activities, film screenings, photography and video workshops, mural painting, animation workshops with boys and girls. In all these activities we unfailingly observed transformation processes and had the satisfaction of finding out the many things of which they were capable, with their hands and their creativity, now serving their souls and no longer the conflict.

Which is why when Juan Manuel Echavarría and María Errázuriz visited me on behalf of their Fundación Puntos de Encuentro and suggested a group of former combatants recently arrived in Bogotá participate in one of their painting workshops, I had no doubts in supporting their objective. I became even more excited when they began by saying it was a question of telling, of painting their life stories, what they’d lived through, what they’d done. I have always believed in this exercise in truth and memory because what Colombia needs, among many other things, to rebuild itself as a nation and as human beings, is to know what happened and why it happened to us. So that it does not happen again. . .

The exercise María and Juan Manuel suggested was quite simple: Bring them together and offer them paint, wooden boards, paper and other basic elements with which to paint and paint. It was that simple, without much preparation, without guiding them or providing any specific topics. Initially, I followed their process, but not too closely. Occasionally I visited the place where they met and observed their progress. At first they made small, timid, opaque drawings that little by little grew and the colors, especially the green, began to take over.



**Corregimiento de El Aro, Ituango
Antioquia 1997
Jesús Abad Colorado ***

Their work always seemed ingenious, spontaneous, and simple; I wouldn’t call it innocent because of the war-related horror that began to parade before my eyes.

I admire graphic testimony —portraits, snapshots. The work of Jesús Abad Colorado, a photographer friend, has taught me to see war in images, in all its crudity, all its pain. His art amazes and moves me. He has been all over the country portraying the horror of the conflict, the sadness

in prisons, the anxiety of mothers and communities after an artillery attack by whomever. But what I saw in the paintings by former combatants showed another dimension; I felt its impact—I who believed I had seen and heard it all. These are portrayals of reality, expressions of real situations with a surrealist tint; nothing in them is the product of fantasy; everything is true, everything has been told in exact detail. . .

At the end of 2007 I had a chance to get to know the work better. As the initial phase of the project drew near, the Fundación invited the budding artists to a restaurant for a year-end party. They invited me along and I listened to their impressions of what they'd been doing for the past six months with paint and a brush. We visited some of the works; they explained them to me, narrating in their own words what they had already drawn. The common denominator seemed to be satisfaction at having been able to tell of their passages through war, difficult for them, but I felt that what they'd dug up from inside themselves and placed on cardboard or wood was the truth and, as I said earlier, we had been hoping for that truth.

The process continued and the goal of the Fundación Puntos de Encuentro for 2008 was to do the same with soldiers from the Ejército Colombiano who had been injured and were recovering at the Army hospital.

The other side of the same coin. I have the impression this process may have been less free; in any case soldiers there are still under institutional control. However, their works also tell their truth, which can be contrasted with the stories told by demobilized combatants. It's enough to look at two paintings dealing with the Naya massacre that took place between December 2000 and April 2001, when the Calima paramilitary block assassinated indigenous people, farmers and Afro-Colombians in one of the country's southern regions. The point of view is different, but the horror is the same. And the victims, so often the case in this country, are men, women and children from our own country, most of them Afro-Colombians, indigenous people and rural inhabitants.

The third phase of the process began in mid-2008 when we invited a group of female former combatants to paint, as we had done with the others. The rules were the same: nothing preconceived; freedom to choose their own subjects as well as the techniques they would use. I repeat, from out of their pain came extremely beautiful things; there is pain and anxiety related to what they've done, to the damage they caused.

Two months later I had a chance to look at the work in all its scope: complete, catalogued and hung on walls. The results are overwhelming: over 420 paintings done by more than 120 artists—women and men—,

who at another time in their lives participated in the conflict as members of guerrilla or paramilitary groups, or as part of the Fuerzas Armadas.



As far as I know, this has never been done anywhere else in the world, in any other conflict, as part of the processes of historical memory.

The exhibition shows us the horrors experienced: the blood, heads and bodies mutilated, girls and women raped, walls painted by the armed actors with the blood of their victims, gorgeous rivers carrying the bodies of men, women and children, breathtaking green landscapes, often showing more green full of coca plants. . . all the degradation of an armed conflict that has surpassed all humanitarian limits. But in many cases we also see the personal story of an armed actor prior to taking up arms: We aren't surprised, several of them were also victims of the horror inflicted by other armed actors—even by those from

Detail
Cat. 72

their same organization— who in chopping off heads put an end to their childhood dreams.

In the months leading up to the exhibition in the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá we organized visits with focus groups to a small sampling of the works: experts in conflict-related subjects and in transitional justice; government officials; academics; artists; members of international community organizations; students, former combatants and some of the victims' representatives. We spoke to all of them about the process and from them we received valuable and most respectful contributions. No one doubts the importance of the work and what it means to the processes of truth and historical memory in Colombia.

And so, by listening to others voices, we began to discover new facets: Painting cured or tormented the spirit, we were told by certain experts; we found the paintings reflected life inside the camps, the daily war including punishment, executions, and death; we also observed that the former combatants are not the protagonists in their paintings, although they have painted themselves into scenes; they consider themselves neither heroes nor "Rambo," but just another actor; the representations of abandoned, lonely villages whose inhabitants have been displaced are striking. Everyone who has seen this work agrees that the victims are at its center.

This is a tribute to the victims of the Colombian conflict; a small sampling I hope will aid in stopping the cycles of violence and revenge tormenting the country for so many decades.

It is a collective NO MORE! including those who often played the part of aggressors. A wake-up call for an entire nation, so we understand that our young people ought to be painting their dreams and not their nightmares.