

The Fundación Puntos de Encuentro under the direction of Juan Manuel Echavarría invited former combatants, men and women from different armed organizations, to paint meaningful experiences from their lives. A single theme susceptible of being painted in a thousand different ways emerges from this proposal: death. This is the essence of war that persists even after leaving the armed conflict behind, which explains its prominence when former combatants of a fratricidal battle are given a paintbrush and urged to expose their experiences.

In the extreme conditions of war, death appears in different guises: when each combatant faces the imminent risk of his or her own death; when he or she includes friends or enemies, in the death toll, along with so many other dead that might go unnoticed; when one's complaisance regarding death is made manifest or when one becomes its author. In such way, war's guest of honor is summoned by these former combatants-turned-painters: before their death... their dead... their deadly acts.

Inevitably, war bares its jaws even after it has been abandoned,

and it continues to stalk each combatant in evocations, in memories, and in the impossibility of oblivion. As in all radical experiences, it leaves an indelible track, and condemns the subject to a mark that cannot be feasibly undone.

### **The painting and the scene**

The works of these artists recur to color and figures in a special way, in an exercise that led them gradually towards skill and fluency. Through the use of diverse styles and nuances, color represents places, settings and actions. Green plus green, landscape; green plus green, camouflage; green on green, camouflage on landscape. Man blends in with his surroundings, or graver still, the actor at war takes refuge in the landscape. Endless green, also a symbol used by pacifists, frames the tragedy and, at the same time, works as its witness.

Red, great stain or tiny dot, almost invisible at times, is blood, destruction and death; red also frames a scene with a sunset or a horizon, paradoxically defining the brilliance as twilight. Red skies reflect blood,

the setting of daily scenes of war; red pastures, paths and rivers stained with the dead. Green and red, expressions of the sinister, tragic splendor, are the colors of a nation whose exuberance and drama are depicted here.

Bodies display their orifices, breakages or shatterings, as part of their transfiguration in war. At times the human figure is drawn with rigurocity and painstaking delicacy, so that no detail goes unveiled. At other times it is roughly drawn in rapid childish strokes; a composition in shocking contrast with the harshness of the scene, combining, as it does, naiveté of line and coarseness of subject matter in the work of a single artist.

This unfurling of shapes and colors captures arrogance and bellicose omnipotence mixed with limitless horror and suffering: truncated maternity, imposed orphanage, lost innocence and exacerbated vengeance. Moreover, it allows the expression of previously silenced personal experiences. Once actors, now spectators of their own work, these artists have been given a privileged opportunity to subjectivate crucial experiences, recomposing

them from the perspective of having left the scene, yet still bearing their inevitable marks of its ravages.

This is not the first scene, in which destruction is unleashed; it is a second moment in the encounter with death, played out by those who have distanced themselves and today are present as authors of a re-creation. They now denounce the unbearable occurrence and bear witness to a scene that involves and even disconcerts them.

### **War and traces of the humane**

In times of war, humanity's traces are revealed on war's sinister and insatiable face in the form of attempts to justify the havoc wreaked and absolute indifference denying one's fellow man equal status. This human drama also includes non-recognition of the damage done, failure to recognize the gravity of all death or posing it as part of the landscape. Those who remain rooted in the trauma will have great difficulty bringing anything other than mere repetition of this scene to a new work.

Each takes his or her own time to bear testimony of death and to expose its cruel imposition, the battered humanity expressed in times of omnipotence and misery, the intimate truth of each individual and his or her tragedy. For some it will be easier to depict the actions of others upon the board, silencing, for the time being, their own involvement.

The pictorial composition of some artists shows the actual killing, the human remains and death as a daily occurrence. Others find it difficult to locate the essential part of their experience in times of war—the direct scenes of destruction, bodies broken into pieces—in spite of the fact that these themes inspire their work. Therefore the recourse arises of producing large works that only evasively reveal death in the magnificence of meticulously decorated paintings, where tragedy becomes apparent only in tiny details. Such is the case of a painting where a pair of boots emerges from the ground where someone has been buried, or the many graves camouflaged in the landscape as tiny bouquets of flowers, as red and white dots, or the small empty squares representing the dead.

For these artists, a return to their war experiences seems linked to new subjective positioning. They insist on including themselves in the scene, composing it with their presence; where, more than spectators, they expose themselves as witnesses and even as authors. What must lie within someone who has drawn him or herself as an observer? And what awaits those who catch themselves watching in the scene?

Another expression of humanity is commiseration with one's fellow man, the experienced condolence which can suddenly deter a combatant at a crucial moment on the verge of the

act of destruction. These are perhaps initial episodes which fracture the logic of war, a fracture that may prove to be permanent, thus becoming a deterrent and a way out of war, leaving no possibility of return.

One particular example of this crucial moment is in the painting that shows the hand of a victim grasping the author of his death, the silent scream of pain, the unheeded voice pleading for commiseration. Some time after the event, the subject returns to the scene with a paintbrush to face, although too late, the person who once stood before him. The subjective implication of his deed now interrogates him: this other scene containing, for the first time, a spark of compassion, leaves him perplexed. This subjective change, imperceptible to others, may prove to be a profound guarantee of no return to war.

In another illustration of that heartrending moment, we observe the drawn face, the doubled-up body of a once proud combatant, the expression of remorse, a back turned for the first time on the unbearable. The impact of the scene, in which he sets himself suffering in the foreground, is a renewed manifestation of his humanity that will most certainly curb his warlike disposition.

The power of another painting draws the spectator in, through the use of an eye, which watches him. The person observing the painting, believing him or herself outside of the terrible scene, is being observed

confronted head on. Whoever the painting stares at, inevitably becomes a witness. Moreover, to observe and then discover oneself observed leaves one trapped within the painting. So what actually is the scene? This artistic ruse seems to claim that no one, regardless of how uninvolved they think they are, can remain outside war.

Painting over painting, observation over observation, dead body over dead body . . . like the person who, upon leaving the war behind, finds himself more dead than alive. When actions and condescendence of these actions occur beyond or in front of the scene, what is the real painting?

### **Work of works**

The strength of this work lies in the courage of the person who dared to take on the truth, urging those most directly involved in the conflict to use pictorial testimony as a form of memory. This is even more complex in a country that pushes for war while concurrently declaring the time has come to honor its victims. While some prefer to radicalize causes, give precedence to the demands, allow scores to be settled or silence history, *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN* reveals a determined effort to provide an exercise in memory that will process, through art, what cannot yet be approached through words.

Juan Manuel Echavarría, who summoned all these brushes, is the

creator of the setting for these painters who have exposed themselves included in the scene. Yesterday they were combatants and creators of their deeds . . . today they risk themselves by revealing their individual scene. As the tragedy of the war is revealed, the painters discover the tragedy of their humanity.

Thus, Echavarría is a creator of artists. Moreover, with his broad generosity and tact he has managed to awaken the subjective experiences of these former combatants. He remained silent, listened to their adventures and misfortunes, and was astounded by their demonstrations of intimacy.

It was ingenuous as well as bold for Juan Manuel Echavarría to risk placing a paint brush in the hands of so many former combatants while conflict and radical confrontation continue to prevail, and to present their efforts to the many spectators whose plurality of views compose the work. Echavarría lays himself open to those who deny or make extreme value judgments regarding their participation in the whirlwind of a war that undeniably involves us all. He shows great courage, sensing his work will contribute to the exercise of memory in a country that at times prefers not to remember or that may take decades to begin recomposing its history, as has been the case in other countries. And we clearly recognize his commitment to humanity in artistic expressions both vivid and obscure, a denouncer of war, a citizen of peace.

### **Onward**

Men and women invited to take up a paintbrush are moved to revisit the events that engorged them into the entrails of war. How many paintings of this type must these artists make before they can move on to new compositions that will offer them each a chance to start life anew?

They may discover through painting a new subjective moment in which to decipher the circumstances that turned them into actors on death's stage and move towards a new positioning in their existence that will keep them forever outside the logic of war. How many detractors, not understanding this process, would choose to take the brushes away from these artists?

The truth of war is the truth experienced by its actor . . . his or her enjoyment . . . his or her tragedies . . . It is also the truth of the silent and even benevolent social group that distances itself from the damage, attempting to place the blame on others or justifying the tragedy. Most unbearable about war is that which we don't wish to know and it is here, precisely, in that un-knowing that the subjective implication is deciphered.

The history of Colombia is a tragedy that now becomes an experience in memory. With this in mind, unlimited possibilities open up in the field of the arts. But this is only the beginning of the long road ahead. Here we are confronted with a mute presentation

in which the authors and their works are compelled to remain anonymous. There is still no opportunity for words, silenced by profound mistrust, fear, threats, or by the risk of judgment and sanctions.

A new possibility will arise for them when they find a chance to give word to their creations, to pronounce their names and compose the scene in their own voices. In these intimate narratives, the subject will emerge with his or her saying. This then will be an occasion to elucidate painful and overwhelming truths, which will manifest both the unbearable and also the pacifying function of the word. It will, therefore, be essential to generously offer countless paint-brushes and many chances to speak in order to mend a history full of pitfalls in human relations and recreate new human bonds that will reinforce life.