

The idea of inviting demobilized guerrillas, paramilitaries and soldiers to paint their war memories is profoundly healing for them and for the society that formed them as warriors and criminals. The paintings reveal stories hidden in the souls of those who fought and suffered the civil war, and their depictions of the uprooting of a nation's rural population are a portrait of the soul of Colombian society; the warriors on all sides of the conflict embody a collective hatred that empowers and demands the extermination of the weak, of those who raise their voices to claim their rights, or those who wish only to live their lives without surrendering to the tyranny of the strongest.

To forsake arms and return to society is to abandon a life governed by orders and embrace a different life as a person responsible for his or her past and present actions. Orders free the perpetrator's conscience from guilt—they think of themselves merely as instruments of someone else's will, which allows them to commit atrocities without being destroyed by guilt. Acting as part of a group under the orders of another brings about

a vertigo akin to transitory schizophrenia. The power of an order to attack, carrying with it an implicit threat of death for whoever receives the order, lifted only when the order has been executed, separates the author from the consequences of his or her acts of violence. Responsibility lies not with the executioner but with whoever gave the order. The executor is an instrument in the hands of others. Orders replace the free will and desires of those who obey.

Commanders of illegal armed groups prefer to recruit those who have suffered at the hands of their adversaries and harness the hatred felt for these enemies, channeling the desire for vengeance of those who have lost a loved one, transforming their desires into reinforced motives for violent action. In the end, many aggressors are victims who have switched roles, standing now behind the barrel of a gun and not in front of it.

When organizations and commanders disappear, the demobilized once again face the horrors of the past in images that cry out for meaning. The victims make sure their suffering is remembered, and

individual and collective judgments attempt to bring about understanding and settle accounts for unpardonable acts. Individuals who commit atrocities face painful personal reconciliation, soul searching that is mandatory if a person is to live in society.

The dead linger on in the pain of those who loved them and as ghostly invaders of the consciences of their assassins. A hired killer employed by military forces in San José del Guaviare spoke of his nights so filled with the faces of the dead that they left no air for him to breathe, until he decided to confess to the justice system in an attempt to banish them from his body and share them with others, and find sleep again. A person who kills can be destroyed by the deaths he or she has caused if scores are not settled.

These paintings take us back to the dead left on the ground, in pools of blood, like unanswered questions. Almost all the victims died on hills and in forests, on riverbanks, in the doorways to their homes and in front of their children, or tied to trees, with no understanding of why they were suffering. Their houses

were simple, rustic, made by their own hands and with help from their neighbors. Their families were dragged off productive land to suffer the pitfalls of urban homelessness. They lived among green Andean mountains, in Antioquia or Cauca, or on the Caribbean plains, in Córdoba, Magdalena or Cesar, on collective lands shared by the black communities of the Chocó, or had colonized a bit of land in the San Lucas mountains or the Catatumbo near Venezuela, or lived in the Valle del Guamuez, in San Miguel or Puerto Asís, or fled the jungles of Guaviare or Caquetá.

The style of these paintings resembles the work of primitivist painters or children's drawings. The innocence of nature ordered by the farmer's hand contrasts with the arrival of illegal and legal occupying armies that broke with ancestral order. Symbolic motifs such as houses are repeated to represent a mother's warmth and protection, or trees that stand for a father's power, almost always diminished or absent. Those who left their broken homes or fled a violent and arbitrary father found refuge in armed groups and replaced the father with a commander who punished or rewarded according to his own law.

Healing the wounds of civil war is a long and difficult process. Many truncated lives are laid to waste along the way, and the survivors do their best to recover their former

conditions and possibilities of existence. To do so they demand, above all, that the truth be known, that justice be done, and that the damage done be repaired. Much has been accomplished in recent years towards these ends, but the decisive factor lies in preventing the deadly consequences of past events from being carried into the future by those responsible for them and society in general.

As Hannah Arendt teaches us, forgiveness, Christianity's greatest political contribution, is the only act capable of preventing past crimes from dragging the chains of shame into the future, and only a promise in the present can ensure a change in the future. The paintings chosen for this exhibit contain the two transformational elements of individual and collective soul, because they clamor for forgiveness through confession and promise to not repeat the past. Perpetrators and victims, united by the same events, must walk the road of forgiveness for the past and trust in the promise of a different future. This road begins with truth recreated through collective memory and the paintings in this collection contribute to this process.



Detail

Cat. 41

Translated from Spanish by Sally Station