

This is a graphic exhibition about war and viewpoint. It is an invitation to explore war from the inside, from the perspective of the demobilized rank and file combatant. He is worth bringing to our attention because, in spite of his de facto involvement in the war, he and his point of view were ignored or little known in the country. This is what *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN* is about. The unflinching visual narrative of war in this exhibition might make some people upset or uncomfortable, but it is a measure of the atrocities of war, its practices, and the victims it produces.

Stories about war in recent times, based on the carefully calculated reports of commanders and squadron leaders, are balanced here with spontaneous recountings by the foot soldiers. Compared to the dubious exercise of the deposition hearings, often used as platforms to heroically exalt their leaders, these young men reveal the horrors of war that they have witnessed and perpetrated. Whereas a reluctance to be forthcoming, and deliberate attempts to cover up the truth, were apparent in the deposition hearings, here the need to make things known is seen. Although

it is true that the brushstrokes of the rank and file fighters will not recreate the full extent of the war, they paint many scenes of their daily experience.

The paintings that make up this collection are tableaux or scenes of memories and representations of violence, created from within and from low in the ranks of the combat units, by paramilitaries and guerrillas, and some by National Army soldiers. These images capture the motivations, the regrets, the impact and, in general, the clear-sighted view of the fighters in this interminable war.

The artists represent the war in these pictorial narratives, but they also represent themselves. It may be said that the workshop that gave rise to this moving exercise had a dual function. On the one hand, to look at themselves, what they experienced and what they did; and on the other, to broaden their perspective to consider the others, their adversaries, and rural society as the environment where their experience of war unfolded.

These paintings are part of a process and an exercise in creation, without much training or artistic guidance. War is the prime material for the paintings, and the catalyst that

inspires the search for the artistic language in which to communicate the experience. The paintings tell stories of war. Sometimes the victims of the fighters are represented, but seldom is the pain of the victims recounted and the degree of personal responsibility for this individual and collective suffering. It is a selection of personal memories that should not necessarily be seen as confessions, but rather as recollections.

Landscape and war

The natural landscape dominates these pictures of war. This distinctive stamp evokes the rural environment that is the scenario and source of Colombia's armed conflict. It is not by chance that the fighters who recreate their experience of combat in this exhibition are mainly young, unschooled campesinos, which makes apparent not only the social and economic origins of the fighters, but also the profile of the victims of this war. In the same way, the landscapes and geography that serve as the settings for these paintings reveal the wide diversity of the regions affected by the war. Despite the range of identifiable

geographic environments, to a certain extent these tend to meld into a single landscape of war. Whether seen by the guerrilla, the paramilitary, or the soldier, the images that tell the story of war have a common denominator: They are a record of the horror.

In all, the landscape is not only about context. There are also views of the place of nature in the war. Rupture and continuity between landscape and war are characteristic of these paintings. Time and again the landscape itself is shown as invaded and assaulted by war. As such, the war against nature may be considered as an extension of the war against people, portrayed as decimated forests, fumigated crops, and rivers running red with bodies. In other cases the war is not seen as attacking the natural world, but rather as part of it. Tiny scenes of violence in wide-open landscapes may be interpreted as a convention for erasing violence or making it seem natural. Of course this might trigger indignation or suspicion, but nonetheless it should make the observer of these paintings wonder about the aloofness of Colombian society concerning the dynamics of our war.

The issues of war

We stand before a visual narrative presented by former combatants that documents war. Multiple stories are told in this depiction: about the diversity of the armed actors, the

variety of their targets, and the extent of the different kinds of violent acts. They reveal violence against the adversaries, against deserters, against members of their own organization, and against defenseless campesino communities.

Each one makes reference to his role in the war, his reasons, his losses, and his enemies, and the sum of these multiple and opposing voices reveals the logic of armed conflict: retaliations, circular repercussions, and changing from one side to the other.

THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN presents a wide variety of the violent practices that are employed on a daily basis in our war: executions, massacres, combats, ambushes, occupations of towns, tortures, rapes, landmines, dismemberments, kidnappings, forced recruitments. . . Each of the former combatants narrates and recounts the atrocities of the armed conflict. Their motives for doing so vary: some are an appeal to the enemy; others seek to justify themselves; others sit in judgment of their organizations. . . These pictorial presentations derive from memory and the truth about the conflict in Colombia.

Considering the exhibition as a whole, all of the visual representations have similarities; they use a similar structure that differentiates victims, perpetrators, practices, and scenarios. They are scenes of the routines of war. Nonetheless, each painting also refers to the concrete

experience of violence that has personal meaning for the former combatant, generally associated with anger, loss, or disillusion. As such, the pictures do not tell the whole story, given that each painting of violence is limited in what it presents or its visual sequence.

At a certain moment —upon breaking through the silence and reticence about the war— the observer may be able to transcend the limits of the canvas and hear the words and intention of the painter, and truly understand the stories of death that are described, in that each brushstroke in this exhibition appears to refer to specific places; to precise moments in the conflict; to episodes and events that one day it will be possible to cite by name. The exercise in seeing that the exhibition proposes suspends the encounter between sight and the word.

The horror that the former combatants paint, concrete horror, has its corollary in the pain of actual victims. The iconography of war presented here offers the observer true indications, presented from low within the ranks of the armed groups, about the magnitude, the degradation, and the psycho-social impact of violence in Colombia's internal armed conflict. There is no delegate speaking on their behalf. At the same time, the people that view the exhibition will create their own narrative.

The former combatants acknowledge and reveal. Standing

before these revelations, Colombian society can not shut its eyes: It has the responsibility to see. The viewpoint of the armed actors transformed into an exhibition must change the way that society looks at war. The stories that these paintings tell should be the source of astonishment and indignation, but they should also be the source of reflection about what made it possible for these events to have occurred, and why these young men followed or chose the road to war.

The task of judging is difficult but inevitable. This examination of the war makes us aware of the need to recognize and confront it. The organizers of this event are clear about one question: Is the country prepared to do something about it? The exhibition is, in the end, an invitation to society to think critically, to act, to mobilize its resources to stop the ongoing tragedy, and to pave the way for the long sought after Never Again!