

*Doris Salcedo: Parameters of “Political Commitment” in Colombia*¹

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¹ This essay is part of a current research work on the art and politics of Doris Salcedo.

Doris Salcedo is a sculptor-installation artist, a “maker of objects” - as she likes to think of herself- and, internationally, she is probably the most widely recognized artist in the history of Colombian visual art. Some would say that she is the most prestigious Latin American artist of the day (Ruiz, J, 2015, November 28). This can be appreciated in the retrospectives which the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and New York's Guggenheim Museum mounted of her work in 2015, and a third which is currently being shown at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami. At the same time, there is an installation which she will inaugurate in 2017 for the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, to honor the memory of those who have died drowning in their attempts to reach the coasts of Europe. All of this confirms that she is at the pinnacle of her artistic career.

A brief look at that career shows that while she has not exhibited much in galleries or museums in Colombia (Luis Angel Arango, 1994, Garcés-Velásquez, 1989, Casa de la Moneda, 1985), her work has been shown in many major venues elsewhere. In Britain, Salcedo is best known for her work *Shibboleth*, a controversial intervention in the form of an enormous crack in the ground, mounted along the entire Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern which was displayed for several months in 2007-2008. She has also had exhibitions in the Tate Gallery (1999), in the Rivoli Castle in Turin (2005) and in the University Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City (2011), amongst others. In 2014, she won the ninth Hiroshima Art prize at the Hiroshima City Museum of Conceptual Art, and before that she received the Velazquez Prize of the Visual Arts, awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture (2010), and a number of other distinctions.

Salcedo was born in Bogota, Colombia, and still lives and works there. She believes that her work is politically and socially committed. "Art in itself is always political, because it is always opening up unknown ways, unknown spaces, and art is also notably ideological, so it is always for or against the establishment" (Razón Pública, 2013, April 4). According to Salcedo, the theme of her work is war conflict and its intrinsic violence. She says (quote)“I take on, with full responsibility, the theme of violence and war. I don’t think that in my work this theme develops in an evolutionary way.” (Princenthal, Bausualdo & Huysen, 2000, p.140). In this context, Salcedo is interested in the point of view of the victims “My works are for the victims of violence. I try to be a witness of the witness. I look for an intimate proximity with the victims of violence that allows me to stand in for them” (Princenthal et al., 2000, pp. 140-141). Although she has set down her roots in Colombia, her work has no intention of being parochial: “When I take the case of Colombia, I do so because that is the reality that I know best... I do not speak of the violence in Colombia from a nationalist perspective.” (Princenthal et al., 2000, p. 142).

My research, still in progress, will try to show how Salcedo’s artwork by the combination of stereotyped symbols seems to awaken emotional reactions of empathy and dejection in the viewer due to the grief and death of the victims of violence. It also shows an emotional and un-transcendental “political commitment” that rather than de-ideologizing, helps to perpetuate the ruling capitalist ideology. It does not go deeply into the historical causes underlying that grief. It is content with a superficial approach which catches viewers’ emotions relatively easy but does not turn these emotions into action.

In advance on the mentioned research this essay will begin, first, with a brief look at the primary political intention of Salcedo's art and the way it converges with the Colombian "New Theatre", close to Brecht's Marxism. Second, it will analyze one of the first series of sculptures by Salcedo, *Untitled* (1995-2008), trying to show how, while this series of sculptures could be interpreted as an allusion to the suffering of the victims of Colombian political violence, they might equally suggest that underlying historical causes of that violence are unchangeable. In this way, Salcedo's work would contradict the de-ideologizing intentions the artist herself expresses.

1. "New Theatre" and Political Intentions in Salcedo's Work

Salcedo believes that art in itself is political, and its intention, to the extent that it makes some hidden content visible, might potentially transform the conditions of life of the viewer. That is, that art is aimed to strip the viewers of ideologies. In fact, she states: "Art is always linked to politics, whether or not that is explicit in a work, because what art does is to open spaces and expand them, so that people can see, say, exist, do, be seen and live a full life" (El Espectador.com, 2010, May). This viewpoint converges with Brecht's thoughts about the theater's need for liberation and transformation of reality, he says: "Our spectators not only have to listen to the way in which Prometheus is bound in chains, but also we have to be active in the pleasure of freeing him" (1972, p.7) and seems to reveal an aspect which has been little analyzed in Salcedo's work, and one that could have defined her artistic career. In effect, Salcedo was to make it explicit in an interview published in her catalogue in 2000, that before she dedicated herself to sculpture, she was interested in the Colombian Theatre of the 1970s (strongly influenced by Brecht), and indeed, that for a time she came to work in stage set design. That experience, mentioned almost in passing, might seem to be a turning point at the start of her artistic development, and might have determined her need to connect the performing arts and critical analysis in her own work:

"I had an extremely thorough training in painting - which I think comes through clearly when you see the surfaces of my works - but I was also interested in theatre. I worked for a short time designing stage sets. It was in the Colombian theater of that time, with its political overtones, that my interests in arts and politics came together; however, this engagement with theatre was just a brief interlude" (Princenthal et al., 2000, p. 8).

At about the time that Salcedo says that she was designing stage sets, the strongest movement in Colombian theatre was "New Theatre", which had a manifestly political commitment. Arising on the backdrop and context of the Cuban Revolution and in line with Brecht's epic theatre, "New Theatre" aimed to strip the audience of ideologies and allow the opportunity to reflect on the hidden political and social contradictions behind the official versions; to generate a transforming social awareness among intellectuals and proletarians. Therefore, it is quite possible to think that, at least at the beginning, Salcedo's work was influenced by "New Theatre" and its transforming intentions close to Marxist thought. How far she went with them is something that we will try to analyze in the next topic.

2. Analysis of Salcedo's First Works. Household Furniture Sculptures, *Untitled* (1995-2008)

With some variations, Doris Salcedo's work is seen as a series of personal reinterpretations of household furniture, things which are usually found in the home. Salcedo takes a piece of furniture out of this plane, and invites it to be a fundamental part of her artistic language. However, it is not any random, old piece of furniture. The piece she selects is not industrial; it's made of wood, the raw material that shares its organic character with the human body (Princenthal et al., 2000 p. 72. Salcedo takes pleasure in symbolic materials since her time in contact with Beuys, (Princenthal et al., 2000, p.10). From certain points of view, the furniture that she selects is "classical", and from others "démodé". In Colombia, wardrobes are no longer part of a modern home, they have been replaced by "closets"; they survive today in period houses, farmhouses and country villages where the modern world has not finally ousted them. They are a kind of furniture threatened by extinction. They are pieces that are 'on their way out'; a presence that suggests the past.

Conceptually, a wardrobe is an empty space, intended to be occupied constantly by intimate objects which are discreetly arranged and disarranged inside them, hidden behind something; out of the sight of others. Symbolically, it is a space of the Intimate. Ideologically, it is a space of Private Property. We can only cross the threshold of a wardrobe with proper authorization; otherwise, we are committing some sort of half- (or even, wholly) criminal act, disrespectful of a frontier: the frontier of the intimate, and the territory of private property. The wardrobe belongs to the home, and within that home, to one's own room. It is a space of the intimate-within-the-intimate. It contains the greater part of the material life of the individual, what belongs to him/her, what identifies him/her, what he or her is made of. Clothing, shoes: memories. If we take the wardrobe out of this setting and put it in a public space is, in itself, a violation of its nature. Salcedo does this in her early works. Her *Untitled* (1992-1988) is a series of wardrobes, overlapping in different ways. The timid wooden wardrobe, meant to be used in intimacy, and to be a place occupied by intimacy, is exposed to public view. However, the human gaze is unable to penetrate it. Salcedo made it her aim to fill its empty spaces, destined for intimate things, with concrete things – precisely, with concrete. What it used to treasure now remains forever hidden, trapped, frozen in time. It can no longer be filled up with other things. It has lost its adaptability to be used. It has lost its functions. It has become a fetish of a fetish, in Marxist terms, of what it used to be, and become mummified for all time. Here and there, that concrete allows us to see scraps of cloth of intimate things. Here we recognize the person who "lived in" it and simultaneously, the person who can no longer live in it ever again. The wardrobe suggests the solidified presence of the *somebody* that it evokes. A *somebody* whose adaptability has also been frozen and mummified forever, a corpse. Salcedo would say that this *somebody* was a victim of violence, just like the wardrobe violated by being made public and being weighed down by cement.

Those who could see the wardrobes all together in Carnegie International in Pittsburgh (1995) thought that they were uncomfortable, or even distressing, "suffocating", "tortured objects", and associated them with people who had disappeared violently. According to Colombian scholar Margarita Malagón international critics referred to Salcedo's wardrobes as: "a series of commemorative tombs", "monuments made in the name of a silenced and

forgotten humanity", "those who were silenced in her country" (p. 172-174).



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1 *Sin Título* http://masdearte.com/dos/media/n_chicago_salcedo5.jpg

2 *Sin Título* https://wgrogan1.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/salcedo_lg.jpg

From my point of view, it is interesting, and almost disturbing, that neither the artist nor the critics perceived anything different from the furniture itself and its substitution for the victims and their survivors in the pieces of furniture analyzed up to now. The piece of furniture particularly a piece of household furniture, while it evokes the home, also makes, as mentioned, a strong evocation of private property. This is a consequence of the capitalist system, and a source of division of classes. It is what fundamentally causes suffering and exploitation of man by man. A piece of household furniture, although it keeps its value in use, also conserves the value of change. Like any other piece of goods, it synthesizes the relations of power that make it possible and simultaneously, conceals them. It retains its value in use, but it is not use that gives it its value. The value is its character as a status symbol. Not all wardrobes or closets are the same. There is no need to violate the furniture artificially, now that it has itself been violated. By cementing the pieces, Salcedo is modifying any possibility of change.

The state of affairs, and the social injustice which is concealed behind the fetish, and causes grief, cannot be modified; it is unchangeable and must remain just as it is. Her works evoke memory, and mourning of the dead, but they forget the deeper causes that caused those deaths. In an attempt to remember the dead, Salcedo condemns the living to impotence. She blocks them from reflection that could induce a social change beyond their grief. Her works suggest to the viewer that the conditions of life from which the violence came are as unchangeable as death itself.

In addition, we should note that the interpretation of Salcedo's sculptures does not seem to ask for an overly complex analysis by the viewer. The outdated pieces of furniture she chooses evoke a human being who, arriving from the past, survives precariously in the present: a memory. If that is a matter of associating that memory with grief and violence; what better way is there than subjecting pieces of furniture to a process which obviously, removes their nature: cement, disfigurement and mutation. The interpretation is simple and effective: the work induces an emotional reaction which in the end seems to converge with the intentions of culture designed for the masses. Art for the masses: emotional, entertaining, and unable to transcend and turn into effective action. Art made-to-measure from Colombia a country uninterested in deep changes that could eradicate social injustice; Art which corresponds to a First World with the remorse to shed a crocodile tear for the disappeared, for those who drowned on the coasts of Europe, for the dead on barriers across the borders; Art that may help the First World/us to feel better with them/ourselves. To finance an artist who comes from these same peoples whom the First World guiltily wants to keep away from, seems to offer it an adequate level of grief with no consequences. This would seem to be more of a strategy for forgetting the *somebody* rather than remembering him. Not without reason, did one of the critics of Salcedo's work say with pleasure "(This is) another type of political art (...). It seeks to establish links with humanity instead of laying blame" (Malagón, M. 2010, p. 167).

Although this essay is an advance on research in progress, in conclusion, it seems, so far that while Salcedo's work arouses emotional reactions in the viewer, it also suggests that the social, political and economic substrates of violence are as unchangeable as death itself. Secondly, given that her work combines symbols relatively easy to read as emotional and un-transcendental "political commitment", it seems to fit in with the capitalist ideology that underpins the international art circuit. All in all and contrary to the primary intentions the artist herself expresses, her work, rather than de-ideologizing, actually is part of and helps to perpetuate capitalist ideology.

It remains for us to analyze whether the same phenomena reappear in Salcedo's subsequent works and if they do, how and why this sort of "political" art follows historical patterns from which it arises and shows itself unable to turn into effective action.

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