

Art in America

LIMA REMEMBERS

Artists in Peru's economically resurgent capital are now free to process the traumas of a violent, politically troubled past.

BY MIGUEL A. LÓPEZ

AFTER 20 YEARS (1980-2000), Peru has returned to a fragile democracy and relative economic stability. With the passing of intense violence between Communist guerrillas and the Peruvian state, exacerbated by 10 years of corrupt, authoritarian rule by President Alberto Fujimori, the country appears to be slowly recovering its long-lost confidence. However, the new conditions have not changed the neo-liberal agenda imposed by the dictatorship. Fostering a profoundly inequitable economic growth, that policy has led to an upsurge in social discontent, with repercussions in the cultural realm.

Only in the last few years has Peru's capital, Lima (population 8.5 million), begun to engage with the global art system. The past decade has been the country's most economically profitable in 40 years, and this bonanza has generated an unexpected expansion of the art scene, evidenced by the emergence of a lively gallery circuit, new collectors and internationally active young artists.

We should, however, avoid an overdose of enthusiasm. While the upper classes devote themselves to permanent partying, social protests take place daily, indicating the limits of Peru's apparent new wealth. This internal split has lately affected much of the nation's art, which conveys both signs of pleasure and traces of violence. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there is a trend toward work dealing with a political history that refuses to be left behind. Many young artists who experienced the civil conflict during their childhood or adolescence now choose to explore its visual record in depth.

IN THIS RESPECT, the most important exhibition of the past decade was "Yuyanapaq: To Remember" (2003), curated by photographers Nancy Chappell and Mayu Mohanna, an extensive survey of documentary photographs originally garnered as part of the investigative work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. With its striking images offering a narrative of the period of unrest that left 70,000 people dead or "disappeared," the show touched off numerous debates over the power and political scope of these pictures as well as the ethical aspects of their reclamation. "Yuyanapaq"—first held for almost two years at the Casa Riva Agüero, a semi-destroyed archive and library building that could serve as a metaphor for the country's internal damage—helped initiate a proposal to create a permanent exhibition structure for such material. Although current president Alan García

Perez and his military high command, attempting to cover up their partial responsibility for past crimes, long obstructed that effort, it has finally resulted in an institution called the Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social, now under construction. Yet the erratic progress of the project, along with its repeated name changes (first Museum of Memory, later Place of Memory, and now Place of Memory, Tolerance and Social Inclusion), is matched by an information void regarding its content. The holdings and future programming have not been made public or even discussed with victim organizations, suggesting a lack of resolve about how to treat Peru's recent history.

Meanwhile, some artists are focusing on old social problems that result from inequality and marginalization. In 2010, for example, sculptor Raura Oblitas (b. 1979) presented the exhibition "Los Textos (entre modernización y abandono)"

[The Texts (Between Modernization and Abandonment)] at the nonprofit Espacio La Ex-Culpable. The show featured a series of installations, such as a rusted iron cage and an abandoned classroom, alluding not only to the decaying structures of Peru's educational system but also to the daily collision between the market regime and public education needs.

Other Lima artists—including Nancy La Rosa (b. 1980), Alejandro Jaime (b. 1978), Claudia Martínez Garay (b. 1983) and Christians Luna (b. 1979)—reflect on the management of resources, the protection of the environment, and the social impact of industry and extractive mining. "Vías de Extinción" (Ways of Extinction), 2009, by Eliana Otta (b. 1981) features 20 drawings made by scraping at a layer of tarlike shoe polish spread over colored paper. Otta's works also appropriate media images of the notorious Bagua Massacre of June 5, 2009—the government's deadly response to a protest by indigenous people against the attempt to privatize their lands. Likewise, large-scale installations of recycled materials, works on paper and landscape sketches by Ishmael Randall Weeks (b. 1976) examine urban collapse and regeneration, as well as the transformation of natural resources into consumer goods.

During the past decade, many artists have explored communications media, seeking how best to process the violent past. Mass media was previously one of the most active sites of the war, as opposing camps struggled to determine what information was presented by the newspapers and television channels. "No supimos dar la cara" (We Couldn't Face It), 2012, a series of drawings by Santiago Quintanilla (b. 1983), is based on official press images showing the partially hidden faces



Above, Ishmael Randall Weeks: *Landscape Intersection*, 2010, carved Italian school books, 4 tables, approx. 6 by 10 by 10 feet. Courtesy Federica Schiavo Gallery, Rome. Photo Giorgio Benni.

Opposite top, an untitled drawing from Santiago Quintanilla's series "We Couldn't Face It," 2012, ink on paper, 13¾ by 10 inches. Courtesy 80m2 Livia Benavides Gallery, Lima.

Opposite bottom, Nicole Franchy: *New Picture* (detail), 2011, 23 postcard collages, each approx. 8 by 8 inches. Courtesy the artist.

of various actors in the internal war: subversives, soldiers, police officers and peasant women, among others. The series points on one hand to the concealment of the identity of many victims swept up in clandestine police actions, but also suggests the impossibility of clearly recognizing those involved in the confusion of armed conflict. Other young artists explore the links between authoritarianism, terror and a childhood marked by latent violence: Stefania Polo (b. 1984) in installations, Luis Antonio Torres Villar (b. 1984) in woodcuts and Natalia Revilla (b. 1981) in drawings.

FROM A MORE POETIC standpoint, the connection between urban modernity and Peru's ecology has inspired ongoing political reflection, perhaps unsurprising in a country whose natural environment is continuously at risk. The work of artists such as Elena Damiani (b. 1979), Nicole Franchy (b. 1977), Pablo Hare (b. 1972) and Sandra Nakamura (b. 1981) moves between the documentary and the fictive, questioning the way in which the state

shapes public space and regulates the movement of its inhabitants. For the project "Dibujando América" (Drawing America), Raimond Chaves (b. 1963) and Gilda Mantilla (b. 1967) undertook a series of journeys through South America between 2005 and 2008. The artists recorded their personal reactions in sketches and notes, using the act of drawing as a tool for analysis, for reimagining each specific physical and social territory.

Other artists are preoccupied with language, highlighting its limitations through works that stress the ineffable aspects of everyday life. Among these pieces are the installations and videos of Janine Soenens (b. 1978), the installations of Luz María Bedoya (b. 1969) and the photographs of Juan Salas (b. 1982). "Acepto que nada es mío" (I Accept That Nothing's Mine), a project by Rita Ponce de León (b. 1982), included in New York's New Museum triennial "The Ungovernables" earlier this year, explores both the affective and sociopolitical dimensions of personal memories. Ponce de León's tiny, meticulous ink drawings respond to stories that she asked friends and family mem-

bers to write about significant collective experiences. The miniatures—depicting crowds of people, protest banners, skies and landscapes—offer intense fragments of once dramatic events, evoking the vulnerability of individuals amid radical mass transformation.

IN RECENT YEARS, the debate over the absence of a museum of contemporary art in Lima has commanded the attention of curators—notably Gustavo Buntinx, who started an alternative, ambulant museum called the Micromuseo (“al fondo hay sitio”) [Micromuseum (“there’s room at the back”)]. Several artists have also focused on this issue. *The Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Lima (LiMAC)*, by Sandra Gamarra Heshiki (b. 1972), is an impressive but fictitious museum of Peruvian and international contemporary art, complete with a website, a collection of pictorial reproductions and fake merchandise. Other endeavors have taken the debate even further. The Colectivo Museo Itinerante Arte por la Memoria (Itinerant Museum of Art for Memory), for example, is an art group that occupies public spaces to conduct open discussions about the memories and representations of the armed conflict.

The Museo Travesti del Perú (Transvestite Museum of Peru), founded by the artist and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano (b. 1969), is a portable museum of objects (masks, wax Virgins, high heels), appropriated images, press clippings and artworks. The project, halfway between performance and historical research, proposes a critical rereading of the history of Peru from the perspective of a mixed-race transvestite. Here transgender, transvestite, transsexual, intersexual and androgynous figures are posited as political actors. In the Epic section, one of the museum’s “transvestite historical genealogies,” the nation’s heroes, in images derived from well-known artworks, are shown cross-dressed. A series of prints by the artist and queer activist Javier Vargas Sotomayor, later appropriated by Campuzano, depicts the indigenous independence leader Tupac Amaru (1738-1781) in the guise of various female icons. Silkscreens produced in the 1980s by the radical art group N.N. feature leftist figures in glamorous “trans” form—including Mao Zedong wearing lipstick and José Carlos Mariátegui, founder of the Peruvian Socialist Party, as an androgynous David Bowie lookalike. The MTP tends to exhibit its collection in simple installations of cheap printouts that take over institutions (cultural centers, galleries, university venues) and public spaces (parks, squares, sidewalks, markets), sometimes accompanied by social protests by sex workers and transvestites.

Toward the end of this year, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo—Lima (MAC-Lima) will have its inauguration. This institution will hopefully complement the fine work carried out up to this point by the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI). The fact that both these museums are privately sponsored indicates the long absence of governmental

PONCE DE LEÓN'S TINY INK DRAWINGS, BASED ON FRIENDS' STORIES, EVOKE THE VULNERABILITY OF SINGLE INDIVIDUALS AMID RADICAL MASS TRANSFORMATIONS.

support for contemporary art in Peru. Nevertheless, MALI has been one of the major forces in the consolidation of the art scene, not only bringing together an important collection of 20th-century Peruvian art but also exhibiting works rarely seen in Lima, many of them by Peruvian artists with well-established careers abroad. Particularly noteworthy were the recent career surveys of drawings by the Berlin-based Fernando Bryce (b. 1965) and photographs by Milagros de la Torre (b. 1965), who lives in New York. Bryce probes historical episodes, copying documents he finds in libraries and archives, and making ink drawings that critique global power relations. De la Torre, photographing various individuals' personal items or altering their ID photos, examines the institutional registry and classification of persons, operations closely linked to the birth of the modern state. Neither artist had exhibited in Lima for over a decade.

ALONG WITH MALI, new galleries have become increasingly active in building international visibility through fairs, residencies and workshops. Prominent today are Galería Lucía de la Puente, 80m2 Livia Benavides Gallery, Galería Revolver and Galería Wu Ediciones, all of which occasionally exhibit foreign-based Peruvian artists whose works

provide critical counterpoints to local art. These include David Zink Yi (b. 1973), Maya Watanabe (b. 1983), Antonio Páucar (b. 1973), Miguel Aguirre (b. 1973), Daniela Ortiz de Zevallos (b. 1985) and Juan Diego Vergara (b. 1972).

Also significant is the recent presence in Lima of art from the provinces, especially from the Amazon region, which incorporates new esthetics and discourses: e.g., paintings by Brus Rubio Churay (b. 1984) and Elena Varela (b. 1968). Similarly, experimental artists of the 1960s-'80s are gaining increased visibility thanks to new research that links them to recent art. For instance, the conceptual artist Teresa Burga (b. 1935) was included last year in the 12th Istanbul Biennial.

The local art scene is now changing, partially in response to the country's political evolution. Extremely pressing among many unresolved issues is the continued dearth of facilities for art instruction. Even more seriously, art historians, critics and curators suffer from a lack of university programs offering multidisciplinary education. This means that Lima still has too few people capable of presenting artists in thought-provoking frameworks, or even of putting them in dialogue with their international peers. Doubtless, the greatest challenge in the years to come is to create dynamic new opportunities for critical and artistic training, whether in collaboration with museums and public institutions or in independent spaces. In addition, the city needs new periodicals and other editorial initiatives, without which it will be difficult to gain any critical perspective on the heterogeneous new path that artists in Lima have embarked upon. ○