Erika Diettes: Drifting Away

This is the second serial project by Erika Diettes, also set in a human drama: this time she alludes to the victims of the Colombia armed conflict. In the previous set, produced in 2005, her lens had focused on the survivors of the WWII holocaust. She picked out 29 individuals and portrayed them with their faces, hands or arms in the foreground, and obtained notes from them in their own handwriting. The proposal is testimony, memory, history and the power of the image as resources which are interwoven to form a special view of a very moving event. The faces look out at us as we see them and think about them. This dialectic reflects the entire intention and judgment which is part of the whole proposal. These survivors of the Nazi concentration camps all migrated to Colombia and refashioned their lives here. The artist has mounted her itinerant exhibition with different scenarios that are still in circulation and accompanies it with a book. She has given her research, and the final result, the name Silencios. Her idea of moral violence and the reanimation of life and the visibility of the real victim is an accusation and reparations for a tragic event. Cultural studies as reference points in the argument of the photograph, an exercise in creativity that can produce signs and significance.

Erika Diettes’ most recent production is also the result of research and fieldwork. It includes a real tour of the scenes of urban and rural violence in Colombia, seeking out the victims of the war and asking them about their memories of it. Her strategy was concentrated on detecting individuals with a direct experience or the grief produced by death or disappearance of a loved one. She came to know them, she visited them and interviewed them. She also persuaded them to part with an item of the victim’s clothing for a short time so that she could take a photograph of it.

One way of remembering and preserving memory is to keep objects, photographs and clothing of those no longer with us. This is a way of keeping hope alive, of fighting oblivion, or ritualizing the experience of death and bringing back a body which is no longer here.

The conflict in Colombia is highly complex and diverse. The leading players include two visible groups, the FARC and ELN guerillas and the paramilitary organizations, the State’s forces of defense and repression, and common crime. All of them are waging a bloody and inhuman war which has formed human tissue as one of the greatest indicators of forced displacement in society today. The production of drugs has taken root in them too, and has allowed the specialized organizations (the mafias) to widen the cracks in an already critically divided country. Violence and death has the longest recent tradition in Colombian culture. It is therefore logical that many artists here have working on this burning issue and continue to be curious about it. It is an inevitable attitude which seeks to sensitize, denounce and bear witness, in order to construct memory and forms of reparation which go beyond the symbolic or solidarity.

One of the forms of evasion which is fostered with the victims is the way that their corpses are thrown away, into the sea or a river. This riverborne departure from the world is a way of removing the identity of the dead and of atomizing the tabulations that could be made of them. It is an effort to erase the facts and let the current disintegrate the evidence of the crime. The water becomes a macabre scenario, displacing all those connotations which it has with the source of life, the vehicle of prosperity, the guarantee of subsistence and the agent of fecundity. By denying all these characteristics, the rushing river becomes the agent of impunity and a macabre landscape round which death is swirling.

As in the series Silencios, these works in Drifting Away lack any unnecessary dramatization or arousals of artificial effects. The clothes float in the moving water and are offered as silent testimony of a great shipwreck. The images acquire greater force by presenting themselves as elements of day-to-day life and use, but also by evoking the absence of their former owners, who can no longer
Erika Diettes sets up the scene with a huge water tank, the lights to illuminate the target, and the single piece of clothing which she has looked for, found and selected. This exercise simulates the catastrophe of the former user by losing its identity and existence, the disappearance of the body; and at the same time encourages the preservation of his memory and the recovery of his name, for the macabre inventory. In order to underline the fragility of life and the image that photography itself gives us, she decided to print the results on large sheets of glass, which act as translucent supports for the pictures. Although the works are individual objects and are presented with that intention, each of the works seems to be complemented by the others. As a whole, the number and variety of these works has an unusual and overwhelming effect which makes it at once powerful and intensely moving.