

Living Cordially with Violence
Milagros de la Torre in Conversation with
Anne Wilkes Tucker



Shining Path leaves dogs hanging around streets of central Lima. This one was left with a note that read, "Teng Siao Ping, hijo de perra" (Deng Xiao Ping, son of a bitch). December 26, 1980. Photo by Carlos Bendezú, Revista Caretas

Anne Wilkes Tucker: We should begin with the first photograph. When did you start to photograph?

Milagros de la Torre: I would have to say that when I first did it with intent and knowledge, it would be with the *Under the Black Sun* project, in 1991, although my father lent me his camera on occasion before that. I was a shy little girl who preferred to spend time in her room. Rather observant and not saying much, it just seemed appropriate, comfortable and “safe” to be behind the camera. Safe, not only with regard to my personality but also to my family’s circumstances, especially my father’s line of work and where I grew up in Peru.

AWT: Let’s go back to those two things. What was happening in Latin America and in Peru, in particular? And what was your father’s situation? First, let’s get a broad picture of what was happening in Peru.

MdLT: During the 1970s and 1980s in the midst of economic instability and military dictatorships, we woke up one day to Shining Path, a Maoist armed terrorist movement. I come from a family where both of my grandfathers wore military uniforms; so did my father. His work was related to criminology and the psychology of the criminal. Those were the topics that filled our bookshelves at home. He was singled out early and brought to be trained in Washington, D.C.

AWT: As a young person in the house, did you pull those books down from the shelves?

MdLT: They were my first and only option, apart from some Peruvian history books, there wasn’t much else to choose from. I remember clearly the anthropological criminology studies that I later recognized as the work of Cesare Lombroso, the biometrics research of French police officer Alphonse Bertillon and the work of physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater, mug shots; tattoos of the criminal, the faces of madness, organized crime codes and language.

AWT: For the last seven years, I’ve been very involved in the history of war photography, and one of the things I have learned is that wars may end, but their effects do not. Many people in the United States will not know that there were

bombings and confrontations and how afraid people in Peru were that Shining Path might take over the country. You probably had to be careful about where you were just so aware that you might be someplace that . . .

MbLT: It was extremely important never to attract attention to yourself, that you pass unnoticed, and when in a public place, you scan for the nearest exit and always sit with your back to a wall and away from windows.

AWT: I have a friend who grew up in Venezuela. His father, when taking him to school, never took the same route twice. Even when my friend lived as an adult in Houston, he tended to take different routes because it was ingrained in him.

MbLT: The notion that these circumstances are ingrained somehow is very interesting to me. There was a moment when I had to leave Lima, not only to further my art studies, but also to escape from middle-class Latin American values. That's when I moved to London.

AWT: Now, before you made that decision, were you still taking pictures? Were you a snapshotter?

MbLT: I took portraits of friends then, of our small scene in Lima.

AWT: You were in London what years?


MbLT: From 1987 to 1991.

AWT: Right after that you began your first major series, *Under the Black Sun*. Did you begin that in college or after . . .

MbLT: In a way, I was educated within the canon of European photography, but I was curious to see the kind of subject matter that was of interest to artists in Latin America. I came back to Peru and headed to Cuzco. I had seen some photographs made during the first half of the twentieth century— actually, my family comes from Cuzco. I visited my late friend Julia Chambi, and we would walk the city with cameras hanging from our shoulders.

It was during that first visit that I became fascinated by the photographic technique of the “minutereros”— the name relates to their ability to have your

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Examined By *B. J. Bates*

Identification card of inmate No. 8332, Florentino Jaso, U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta; Records of the Bureau of Prisons, Record Group 129; National Archives at Atlanta, Morrow, Georgia

photographs ready within minutes of the take, and the concept of my first series, *Under the Black Sun* was envisaged.

AWT: So how did your research on the Cuzco School begin? What did that involve?

MdLT: It involved gaining access to some photographic archives deposited mainly with photographers' families at that time; I believe they were later accessioned into a museum. The Cuzco School developed during the first decades of the twentieth-century, while having as a context economic growth and the Indigenismo movement, which looked for a revalorization of Inca ideals. The Cuzco School of Photography produced some of the most intriguing, beautiful

images I've ever seen— there's that crisp intense mountain light that irrevocably makes one think of its counterpart, that deep acute shadow or black sun. I had the chance to study glass plates, vintage and modern prints from artists like Figueroa Aznar, the fantastic Hermanos Cabrera, Gabriel Gonzáles, Miguel Chani and Martín Chambi.

AWT: Let's back up a little bit and go back to London and talk about when you began to understand the role of concept in the photographic process. Now, how is that? Because you're not just looking at the object per se; you are taking the object to another level. How did you begin to take that step from the object to concept?

MbLT: Apart from Incan and colonial art, I didn't have much contact with art exhibitions or art books. Once in Europe I tried to assimilate as much as I possibly could and became interested in French postmodern thought— Michel Foucault and his analysis of "the other," mental institutions and the prison system; Jean Baudrillard and his ideas on signification, meaning, clues and signs; Jacques Derrida's oppositions that could become ambiguous, as in absence/presence . . . Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas and Georges Bataille.

AWT: You have been more interested in something that is simultaneously both more intimate and more international, suggesting the power of the vernacular object beyond its immediate locality. Am I right?

MbLT: I've always perceived my work as intimate and have chosen to challenge conventional photographic practice with, at times, very conventional photographic language, as part of a strategy to undermine its documentary role. I felt this could only be truly and subtly destabilized; through its own means and in that sense, open a door to a "somewhere else" location. I remember one exhibition that had an impact and portrayed these concerns for me, *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*. For the first time, photography meant something else, a few steps away from what it represented.

AWT: I can see the surrealist roots in your work, but you rarely—there may be a series where this is not true—but you rarely transform the object beyond recognition. Many of the surrealists push it until the object is no longer the object. Rosalind Krauss talks about this in the case of Brassai twisting a nude form until

it becomes something else. You always seem to keep the object “as is” for someone who isn’t looking for metaphor or transference; we can see it as just an object. Talk about that decision.

MdLT: Objects are charged with human experience; they are depositories of meaning. When I worked on *The Lost Steps* series, I carried and placed these testimonial materials in front of the camera, and even though they looked like regular everyday items—a fork or a skirt—there was an indiscernible density to them, a certain weight. They had been witnesses to some extreme human event. I decided to work within a nineteenth-century technical limitation, when the lens development didn’t permit to coverage the whole negative plate, thus visually surrounding the object with a dark aura. I think there’s a frontier, an in-between place, within observing a photograph of an object and realizing or not what you’ve seen.

AWT: In my experience, for a photographer to be able to do that, there has to be some kind of emotional connection that somehow, after 30 years, I still don’t fully understand. The photographer transports the viewer into the scene so that we feel that connection even though it’s a “straight photograph.”

A couple of questions about *The Lost Steps* series. One person writing about your work said that you took only 15 photographs. Is that true?

MdLT: No, I took many more.

AWT: So the photographs selected are a distillation of that whole effort. Another question is about the role of words. It seems to me that in this particular series, maybe more than in any other, the role of words—both in the selection of the series title and the text that you put with the photographs—became important. Let’s start with the series title. The title is *The Lost Steps*, but one writer assumed it was *The Last Steps*. Was that a play on words that you were conscious of and made a decision about?

MdLT: Once I got permission to work in the Palace of Justice in Lima, and after working there for a couple of days, I overheard someone mention, “el hall de Los Pasos Perdidos,” the Lost Steps Hallway, which is a corridor that goes from the bright grandiose entrance of the neoclassical courthouse to the somber back rooms with almost no sunlight, where the criminals are kept to await their hearings.



"Flag confiscated from Shining Path terrorist."

From the series, *The Lost Steps*, 1996. Toned gelatin silver print. 16 x 16 in. (40 x 40 cm)

AWT: The writer apparently assumed the title was *The Last Steps* because they were the last steps for some, whereas the language shows the more poetic and evocative choice of words.

Now, did you write the text that accompanies each picture, which explains how this vernacular object was used in a crime?

MbLT: Yes, I did.

AWT: What were you trying to make clear through your use of words? And what were you trying to evoke?

MbLT: I'm very interested in text and what it can convey. While working with the person in charge of the archive, which has a great name in Spanish, 'Archivo de los cuerpos del delito' (The Archive of Criminal Offense Bodies, Corpus Delicti), he would tell me confidential details of the object and the crime it was related to. His work consisted of organizing these objects and bringing them down to the trials when the judge and lawyers requested them. Normally he would have to wait, and listen, in a back room before he was asked to enter. I tried to present these facts in a very concise, precise, police-like description of the object, which as a child, I always found metaphorical.

AWT: You wanted to convey the information but not lead the viewer?

MbLT: I was just trying to be as factual as possible, as in any investigation or research. Just presenting a few details in order to ignite the viewer's thought process and imagination.

AWT: But no matter what you do, both objects and text are loaded.

MbLT: Those layers are the ones that interest me.

AWT: Earlier, you referred to that moment of surprise from terrorist attacks by the Shining Path. There is a kind of cold, calculating human capacity for violence in a terrorist act. It seems to me that the objects that you photographed were used in acts of passion, acts that were not calculated.

MdLT: I was astonished by “my reality” once I moved from Lima to London; it was difficult to believe I'd been, not surviving but, living cordially with violence. I didn't know how else to live, what to expect, how to react. Simple everyday actions, like taking the subway, became surreal. I was always turning around . . .

AWT: . . . looking behind you.

MdLT: Then I understood how strong this circumstance had been on me, on all of us living in Peru at that time. One became resilient in such a manner that you would undermine violence. Again, one split-second could change the whole story.

AWT: So in 1991, when you went back to Peru, it was the end of the Shining Path. The Path was gone, but the residual was there. The training was there. The imprint is there.

MdLT: Yes.

AWT: Your next step was the series *The Last Things*. How did you get into the middle of an asylum? What led you to that place to photograph?

MdLT: The connection to the “other,” which intensified through some of my readings. Since I was small, there were always two sides, as in “police and thieves.” We were the police, but we shared a common ground of knowledge with criminality. There was only a thin line that separated us, very thin. There was a serious interest in the marginal in our society, a psychological understanding of the “other.” That's how I came to work with the discarded objects at the Hospital Larco Herrera for the *Mentally Ill* and *The Last Things* triptych was produced.

AWT: Within trying to understand the “other” is the huge issue of identity. Who are we in relation to somebody else? And who are they in relation to us? It seems to me that with the series *Under the Black Sun*, certainly, the issues of race, perception and the ambiguity of meaning arise in your painting of portrait subjects' faces to make them whiter. You raise questions about what is white skin and dark skin and their relationship to class. In that very first series, you dealt not with violence per se but with other issues that continue to pervade work.

Censored is a series you did in 2000, which touches on many issues, one of which is the Spanish Inquisition. You got a grant to go to Spain. Now you're working in yet another country. How did that series come about?

MdLT: I was invited to exhibit my work at the University of Salamanca, which has the oldest library housing publications of the Spanish language. The curator of the show, Alberto Martin, told me about some books that he thought would interest me. They were ideal, not only because of the physical layers of paper or ink used to censor some passages but also because of the implicit gestural action. It seemed that the red ink from *Under the Black Sun* came back as a darker ink in *Censored* or a lack of ink in *Left Blank*. Those coatings and visual layers are essential.

AWT: There is your interest in words— there are words on the page and words that are obliterated. Do you care if we can read the words that remain?

MdLT: The words we manage to read (most are in Latin), are delicately complex and understated. We enter a play of presence/absence; we're given a clue. I accepted the fact that those censored passages were out of sight, and thus a mystery. Only recently a friend told me, he had looked up those hidden words. To my surprise, they weren't as subversive as was implied; the physical gesture of the censors felt more violent.

AWT: One of the back and forth movements that I see in your work is a conceptual base, but unlike many conceptual photographers, you care about the final print. So, there is a love of the aesthetic, and a formal quality in your prints. They are objects that have a kind of seductive beauty in various ways and that's conscious.

MdLT: I'm pleased you think that way.

AWT: When looking at the pages in *Censored*, I wondered if the inquisitors making those violent slashes had any idea of themselves as mark-makers, because some of the resulting images are quite beautiful and abstract and have a lyric quality that is antithetical to what the inquisitor did, which was to obliterate information and people. We don't know what they obliterated.

MdLT: That mysterious and abstract quality drew me in. The books were printed on cotton paper, and because of the passage of time, different textures had come out and the ink had taken a darker brown tint. I don't believe the inquisitors were aware of the significance of leaving these beautiful traces and signs, although I remember that in the front page where one normally finds the title of the work and the author's name, there was the censor's signature next to them, almost as if claiming it as his work, claiming authorship.

From far away the photographs seem like expressionist drawings or paintings. When one gets closer, one starts discovering the hidden words resurfacing, the brush quality of the strokes . . . and then one realizes the implicit violence within these pleasing images— there's a reaction.

AWT: So, in all your work, for the viewer, there is this push-pull— this attraction to the object, this . . .

MdLT: . . . seduction.

AWT: Seduction. Then there is a kind of dawning realization of what we're looking at and we step back and this creates a tension in the work.

A series that I found related to *Censored* is *Bleus*— you used the Spanish word for "bruises."

MdLT: French, *Bleus*.

AWT: They're so abstract and so painterly, the bruises. You didn't inflict those bruises on yourself intentionally, did you?

MdLT: No, I didn't.

AWT: You happened to notice that you had bruises . . . other things on your mind and you ended up with a bunch of bruises . . .

MdLT: The skin works as a layer of protection. These "bleus" were a shielding reaction to injury. Once photographed very close up they became painterly, as you said, abstract, with beautiful pastel colors as in a landscape. But then there's a change of perception, the pleasing image reveals a lesion, a wound.

AWT: Besides *Bleus*, you've done *Imprint*?

MbLT: *Imprint* is a project about involuntary markings, made through dental pressure, on my skin at moments of deep concentration during research, reading, while writing or considering possibilities. I started noticing that while doing research on the computer or after prolonged periods of concentration, these teeth marks would appear on the skin of my hand, some softer, some deeper, as if signaling the topics of my work – automatic unconscious gestures where the skin becomes a landscape for inner dwellings.

AWT: How did *Sharp-edged* come about? How did that project arise?

MbLT: *Sharp-edged* presents objects to penetrate that shielding armor, that is the skin. The project is an inventory of crudely-made blade weapons confiscated from common criminals.

AWT: A collection of knowledge. Where did you find the weapons?

MbLT: Police precincts in Mexico.

AWT: You were living in Mexico at the time? And the weapons were handmade?

MbLT: Handmade with the passionate and desperate feelings of the criminal mind. I find them terribly evocative and possessed of an unusual beauty.

AWT: Again, you find a kind of design element in them, in how they were made, in the sculpting of them relative to what they're meant to do, in getting a handle made, etc.

MbLT: I recognize the human condition implicit in them, how the need to have a handle arises in order not to hurt yourself even though your objective is to hurt someone else or threaten somebody else. The approach was to work within a very limited depth of field so that the focus of the image would fall on a certain detail—a broken blade, a hand sewn handle—and the rest would slowly disappear, out of focus.

AWT: When relative to your work, did you begin to have children?

MdLT: Lorenza was born in 2001 in Mexico. I had just finished *Sharp-edged* and the small series called *Armored*. While pregnant, I started researching perception— more specifically, visual perception— which led me to the project *Newborn*, a fact-based photographic interpretation of how a newborn “sees” the outside world during his or her first three days of life.

AWT: It made sense to me since we’ve been talking about how your life was shaped by your parents’ perception of the dangers of the world, how you were guided to protect yourself against the dangers of the world, and how you’ve become aware of that “thin line,” as you referred to it. You’re so research-oriented. Everything you do is researched. It didn’t surprise me that you researched how your daughter would learn to see . . .

MdLT: I believe you re-live, re-experience life when you have a child. Inevitably one starts questioning and then discerning the most essential of human traits. Vision and reflection are of core importance to my work.

AWT: What fascinated me in reading your text for this series, never having thought about it before, is that clarity of vision comes along for babies about the time they begin to develop language.

MdLT: Amazingly at around eight to nine months of age.

AWT: So their first words occur about the time that their visual apparatus comes together to give them sharp . . .

MdLT: . . . perception and conception of their surroundings, of the world.

AWT: I was surprised when I first saw the series, but when I thought about it, I realized that there are the issues of representation, perception, cognizance and layers . . .

MdLT: . . . of signs and clues to decipher. After so many years of human culture, it is still intriguing the way we perceive and represent our world. As we evolve, we alter our interpretations and conclusions.

AWT: Do you work in film or digital?

MbLT: I've done most of my work in film, but I started working with digital a few years ago.

AWT: What choice do you have? What's the most problematic part of that for you?

MbLT: Well, I do love the craft of photography and my large-format camera. I've been happiest working in the darkroom, printing for days at a time, working with the texture of fiber-based baryta papers. I do love taking my time making a single photograph.

AWT: So many photographers I've talked to miss the magic of watching a print coming up in the developer. Sally Mann said that she didn't like digital because you don't get the mistakes that you can learn from.

MbLT: I can understand that. I was thinking the other day, looking through all the series and considering how they relate to one another, and I realized that underneath all of them was a quest, a proposal of working with photography's technical limitations or mistakes. Done subtly, the authority of photography as a faithful recording is destabilized. Then a new code is created, trying to push photography further, to its subversive potential, to a new place of awareness where photography should take us. This is especially so at the stage we're in now with the advent of cell phone photography or our changing sense of images seen only on a computer screen.

In *Under the Black Sun*, it's a rudimentary technique that I appropriated, but I stopped in the middle, in the negative stage. Or, for example, in the series *It All Stays in the Family*, it was the purposeful use of unsynchronized flash. In *The Last Things*, I put a thick layer of wax on top of black-and-white prints, suggesting erasure, and in *The Lost Steps*, I worked under the restriction of nineteenth-century lens development.

AWT: In the pictures I've seen of the installation of *The Last Things*, the photographs sit on the floor. Is that right?

MdLT: Sometimes they sit on the floor; sometimes they are installed on the wall.

AWT: So that's an installation component. Were there other times when you "installed" works other than on a wall?

MdLT: I believe installation is a component of the work, its relation to human scale. There is a well-thought-out decision behind the format of each work in relation to its theme and the spectator.

Left Blank is a project that deals with the pages "left blank" in the census books of the early twentieth-century, when the great wave of emigration from Europe to the Americas took place. The names, addresses and trades of family members were not recorded in the expectation that they would return one day. These are images marked by an absence of signs; the empty pages represent the presence of those who do not appear in the registry. This project was installed in a confined room, with two photographs placed on a white shelf, on each wall.

AWT: On a ledge?

MdLT: Yes, the photographs surround the spectator. They tend to warp owing to the use of an aluminum support of minimum thickness in proportion to the size of each piece.

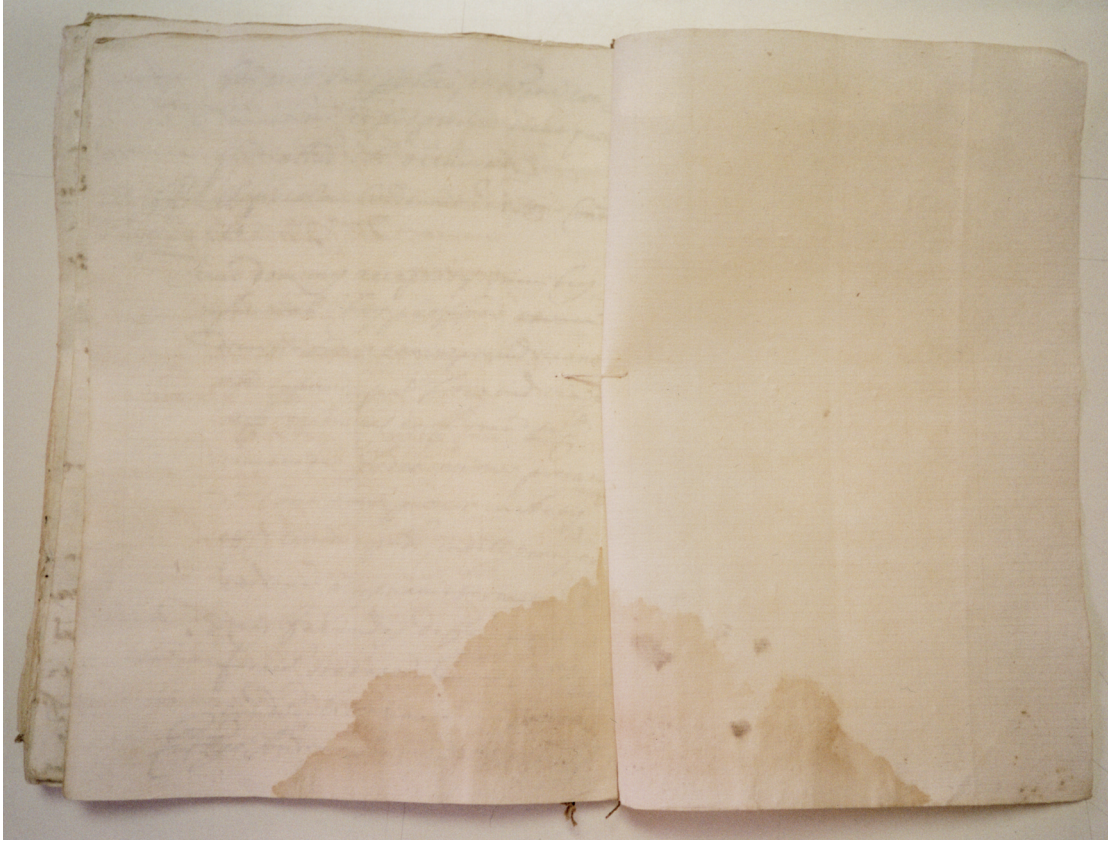
AWT: So they're not framed.

MdLT: They're not framed; one can easily sense the photographic paper.

AWT: It's an object on a thin ledge and there's a slight . . .

MdLT: . . . there's a slight curve to them.

AWT: If someone is standing in the room and experiencing walls of blank paper, they might think about what should or might go there. Is that component of the installation something . . .



Left Blank, 1998. Matte Chromogenic color print mounted on aluminum. 40 x 50 in. (100 x 120 cm)

MdLT: I always think about the physicality of the works. I did a small series of five images called *Armored* that presents in the style of a classic three-quarter pose portrait, the evolution of different characteristics of armored vehicles in Mexico City. The small-format, intimate print brings the viewer physically close, to observe and study the differences between the models, and because of the proximity, the perception of danger that these vehicles normally generate goes away.

AWT: By intimate sizes you mean 8 x 10 inches or . . .

MdLT: The paper size is 16 x 20 and I think the image is 4 x 5.

AWT: Which is a great contrast because *Left Blank* are closer to 30 x 40.

MdLT: Scale is a means of relating.

AWT: Do you think it's important to your work that you're a woman? Is that a factor?

MdLT: I'm a feminist, interested mostly in the feminine nature. Probably the seduction of the object, the suggestiveness of the photograph, the textures, a certain quality of the photograph's appearance and the unresolved mystery of the subject matter are feminine qualities.

AWT: And ambiguity is another kind of dialectic within your work, this tension and not just how you articulate this component, which makes it simultaneously clear and ambiguous and . . .

MdLT: Photography, that's photography.

AWT: But that's new thinking.

MdLT: That's what intrigues me still about photography and doesn't let me sleep sometimes, how it is not just what you see.

AWT: What would you like the viewer who comes to your show to take away from the six or seven series that you've done? What would please you the most for someone to go away with or to write in a comment book? How would you like them to engage?

MdLT: Hopefully, the works would trigger for the viewer, reflections about human nature, the quest toward understanding the marginal and the darker side in all of us and how this understanding is necessary to comprehend the whole picture. That would be fantastic. Although I'm not proposing any definite answers, just an allusion on things.

AWT: I think your work is very generous in that you're not directive. You are provocative but you don't try to control us. You stir us up, but then we are responsible after that.

MdLT: It is great you see it that way.

AWT: A generous approach to an audience.

MdLT: Sometimes almost imperceptible clues make us question further.