

OSCAR MUÑOZ: INVISIBILIA

Phoenix Art Museum, November 2020—March 2021



Re/Trato (Portrait/I Try Again), 2004

Video projection, 28"

Variable dimensions

Collection of the artist.

OSCAR MUÑOZ: INVISIBILIA

Curatorial Statement

Dr. Vanessa Davidson, Shawn and Joe Lampe Curator of Latin American Art

Invisibilia is the first mid-career survey of Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz's work in the United States. Although he has had large-scale retrospectives throughout Europe and Latin America, this project will introduce US audiences to a broad scope of his evolving practice. It will be accompanied by a comprehensive bilingual catalogue of his production with contributions by leading scholars in the field. Beginning with his early, stark charcoal drawings from the late 1970s and early 1980s, whose approach to light and shade continued to impact his aesthetic in later photographic and video works, the exhibition will include approximately 50 exemplary works from his most evocative series created during the late 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and to the present day, including site-specific work. In addition, at each venue, Muñoz will recreate local iterations of his *Lugar a dudas* (Room for Doubt) workshops, which he founded in Cali in 2006 as a cultural center and hub for young artists and the local community to participate in public dialogue about art and politics. Opening at Phoenix Art Museum in the November 2020, the exhibition is anticipated to travel to additional US venues beginning in the spring of 2021.

Referring to the succession of wars that have stricken his native Colombia over the past five decades, Muñoz remarked: "How can one assimilate and articulate in one's memory all these events that have been happening for so many years now?" "My work," he continued, "focuses on the signs of this immemorial setting—the impossibility of definitively retaining and fixing past events—and strives as well to provoke memory by using a similar device, that is, by focusing on impermanence and the intangible. Invariably employing the photographic act and its chemical nature as both reference and metaphor, and centering especially on the genre of portraiture." Since the early 1990s, Muñoz has consistently explored the elusive phenomena of memory, history, and time by lending them visible, physical form, but often only fleetingly—just as we, too, are prone to forgetting. In so doing, he has reinvented the medium of photography, creating hybrid works that splice photographic processes with drawing, painting, printmaking, installation, video, and sculpture, as well as interactive works.

This is why, despite being awarded the 2018 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography, Muñoz is not truly a photographer. His radical approach may be grounded, in part, in the fact that he studied drawing in art school but investigated photographic processes and their diverse creative possibilities independently. This personal exploration fostered experimentation, trial and error, and expanded uses of photography as a vehicle for other formal, material, and conceptual concerns. In his *Cortinas de baño* (Shower Curtains) series of the mid-1980s, he first fused his methods with their meanings, creating shadows of people in the bath using water and airbrushed ink directly on the plastic curtains themselves. Since that time, he has often collapsed the process of his artistic practice into the work he strives to achieve. That is, many of

his approaches and projects are together self-referential, although never self-contained. Their material structure and conceptual content often mirror one another, such that his works' very substance embodies that to which he refers.

This is especially true with regard to works that have to do with impermanence, the fragility of life, and the precarity of the image, as well as dichotomies of presence and absence, memory and oblivion, past and present. For instance, obituary images of those "disappeared" in armed conflict literally disappear when we are not looking and breathing upon them (*Aliento/Breath*). Self-portraits silkscreened in charcoal onto water sediment over time, becoming disfigured, as we all do in the course of aging (*Narcisos* and *Narcisos secos/Narcissi* and *Dry Narcissi*). An aerial photograph of the artist's native Cali covered with sheet glass fractures and crackles underfoot, much as pedestrians on these city streets themselves tread pavements littered with glass from blown out windows of bombed buildings (*Ambulatorio/Walking Place*). And images and texts pyro-engraved on newspaper seem to dissolve and disintegrate as we turn their pages, just as the original periodicals from which their content was derived became obsolete the day after printing (*Paístiempo/Countrytime*).

The material transparency and conceptual materiality of Muñoz's practice merit further exploration, but are only two of the axes around which this exhibition and catalogue project revolve. Also highlighted will be the ways in which he transforms the media of photography and video into interactive experiences, making formerly passive viewers active. From gathering around images projected on the floor at our feet, watching as charcoal faces disappear down swirling drains and then recompose again, to watching a life-sized ghostly figure interchange photographic images from past and present upon papers on a shelf on a long wall—we are compelled to engaged interaction, becoming participants in subtly performative works that condition our movement. At times, it is the artist whose hand performs before the camera. In *Re/trato* (Portrait/I Try Again), we watch this hand continuously attempt to paint a self-portrait using a wet brush on sun-warmed cement, only to have the sketch evaporate as soon as he finishes; like Sisyphus, he tries in vain again and again.

The materials Muñoz often employs—light, water, fire, and dust—are cosmic elements that supersede human life cycles, but his recurrent emphasis on using such unorthodox media to create portraits lends them a fundamentally human dimension. Many of the themes his works evoke are concepts that we all experience differently over the course of our lives, especially memory, amnesia, identity, and the transience of life. Even his references to violence as a dire fact in Colombia (but in works that hinge purposefully around the fragility of images themselves) have a local as well as a universal character—his approach to such themes is more philosophical than political. As he stated in 2005: "Undeniably the fact of having lived and grown up in Cali, in Colombia, a country with numerous, complex, and thorny conflicts, contributes to a certain outlook, a drive, maybe, a need to explore this to some extent in one's work. [...] The development of this reality, of these experiences, taking them to a poetic level, to a universal level and

to a level that has to do with artistic language and the like, is more or less what I have explored in my work.”

The universality of Muñoz’s production lies in his exploration of far-reaching themes of identity, time, knowledge, and history in diverse media, and the ways in which his material experiments mirror the inherent instability of images themselves and the precarious nature of life. It is additionally present in how he collapses distinctions between autobiographical and “found” photographic images to telescope the personal into the universal, the present into the past, identity into anonymity, knowledge into ambiguity, as in such works as *Sedimentaciones* (Sedimentations), *Editor solitario* (Solitary Editor), and *El coleccionista* (The Collector), to name only the most recent. In all three of these video installations, a ghostly hand or figure moves photographs across surfaces, splicing the physical presence of blank pages placed on tables and installed upon walls with the intangible projections that define their visual content. We watch as images from the artist’s life are juxtaposed with and replaced by iconic historical photographs or photos of anonymous individuals collected from photographers’ archives, as well as images drawn from mythology and the global history of art. They unfold in sequences as bearers of disparate yet seemingly interchangeable historical moments, as faces are made to appear and disappear again in continuous loops by this unknown hand.

The presence of trays of photographic developing chemicals in *Sedimentaciones* alludes to our own fundamental agency in crafting memories out of life events, but their reversion back to blank pages also evokes how quickly we forget, as our memories sediment and become lost. In addition, the title of *Editor solitario* evokes the ways we marshal images as evidence of life lived, at once the editors and curators of our selves as defined through remembered moments; the game of solitaire can be played endlessly, as we sort through playing cards and then set them up to begin again. In this era of the overshared selfie, how is one’s identity distinguished from others? Muñoz’s fleeting projections remind us of how our very subjectivities are often encapsulated within the photographs we keep and collect to document our previous selves, our previous lives, losses, and loves. He marshals the photographic image as a mnemonic device, prompting us to reconsider how our own memories of the past inform our present.

Muñoz interweaves history into the present in diverse ways, at the same time that he creates (and recreates) images steeped in the fabric of Colombian society and history that have at once a site-specific and a universal character. A seminal example is his *Archivo porcontacto* (Bycontact Archive), based on an archive that he bought from the *Instantáneas Panamericanas* photographic studio before it shuttered in the late 1970s. From the 1950s until the 1970s, ambulatory photographers (*fotocineros*) shot and sold these thousands of informal snapshots of people crossing the Ortiz Bridge, an iconic artery that connects the center of Cali with the north. Muñoz not only displays these images in cases to illustrate the serial repetition of anonymous individuals photographed at the same landmark, one after the other, but also includes present-day

photos of those identified holding these diminutive, past portraits of themselves in their hands or in family photo albums. Past and present collide in aged faces and in changes to the surrounding urban architecture, a site that has seen much social change and political upheaval. Today, we are all *fotocineros*. Yet these vintage images have a symbolic charge that transcends geography, as we become witnesses to a momentary present, frozen in time, but juxtaposed with visual evidence of time's irrevocable elapse.

Muñoz presents another means of viewing the present through the lens of the past in his *Impresiones débiles* (Weak Impressions) series, pivotal images from the span of Colombian history serigraphed in charcoal dust onto methacrylate. Many of these photographs appear in history textbooks, but here, although still recognizable, they are faded almost to white as if overexposed. The artist's method enables him to shift the focus of the resulting print to place emphasis on details not highlighted in the original. In the process of rewriting history by giving it a slightly different slant, he also calls into question the presumed objectivity of the camera's eye. The image re-created in *El testigo* (The Witness) depicts the historic relinquishing of arms by rebel groups, photographed by government agents with the goal of identifying insurgents they could later assassinate. Muñoz alters the image's focus from the iconic handshake in the foreground to the blind "witness" who stands behind their clasped hands; his unseeing eyes could never betray the secret truths of this landmark encounter. In an ingenious, radical use of material and method, Muñoz lends us his "impressions" of the past, perhaps prompting us in a more universal sense to reconsider the interactions between actors in other images documenting realities we once thought we understood. He also interrogates the very idea of truth in acquiring knowledge from images of a transient past whose nuances escape the photographer's lens.

This figure of the blind witness finds conceptual echoes in the abyss between seeing and not seeing, revealing and obscuring from view, that Muñoz explored in his *Tiznados* (Tainted) series of 1990 and later in the *Pixeles* (Pixels) of 1999-2000. Los Tiznados were a paramilitary group that arose to wreak havoc in Colombia in the 1990s. Taking as his point of departure overexposed photographs of anonymous murdered individuals printed in newspapers, Muñoz worked and reworked them using charcoal and gesso until their layered surfaces made the original images almost unrecognizable, nearly abstract. Using charcoal not as a drawing implement but as a symbolic, ashen substance chosen for its materiality and its association with death, through his facture he re-created the impossibility of clearly seeing these cadavers. Images originally overexposed through an excess of photographers' flash now became overlaid, impastoed surfaces, nearly impossible to decipher and comprehend—perhaps also an allusion to Colombians' numbing overexposure to images of violence.

In a similar vein, but reflecting the unabatement of violence in the new technological age of computer imaging, the *Pixeles* he created out of sugar cubes stained with coffee—the foundation of Colombia's export economy—recreate images of anonymous faces of those killed in the crossfire between military forces and paramilitary insurgents.

One must squint to make these faces appear cohesively before the eye; they remain latent there, in the throes of death, incongruously captured in sweet sugar. Although these two series have an undeniably political punch, they allude to a philosophical dilemma: what is captured when a photograph is taken, in that fleeting opening of the aperture to light, and what remains afterward? By recasting such images that we must strive to perceive in symbolic materials, Muñoz makes us actively complicit in gleaning meaning from the disfigured faces they at once display and obfuscate. Both series' fragmentation of the image alludes to our own impossibility of fixing images in our memories, which inevitably fade with the passage of time, like his grainy originals pixilated on newsprint and computer screens.

Images that alternately appear and fade into disappearance have long been a theme of Muñoz's investigations (*Re/trato*; *Proyecto para un memorial*; *Biographias*; *La línea del destino*; *Hombre de arena*; *El puente*; to name only a few). His 2004 *Eclipse* transforms this phenomenon into both process and product. For this installation, concave mirrors are positioned at eye level in front of darkened windows, with tiny holes drilled in the wall directly before them. This simple mechanism effectively turns them into camera obscuras: the view outside the window is refracted, inverted, upon the gallery wall. Yet the mirrors themselves partly obscure the reflection, just as the sun is partially hidden in the solar eclipse that lends the work its title. The museum itself is thus transformed into a camera, but the images it generates are impermanent and ever-changing, reflecting a pure present rather than fixing a moment from the past. Capturing life and its flux as it unfolds in real time and space outside of the museum's walls, this installation literally brings the outside community inside the gallery. Marshaling light itself as an intangible artistic raw material, *Eclipse* encapsulates the artist's diverse experiments with the very mechanisms of the photographic process, which he turns inside out to reimagine its products and our intimate interactions with them. When the galleries empty and the lights darken, moonlight creates ghostly reflections of the shadowy scene outside upon the walls. Now, there are no witnesses to images of an elusive world that evades capture as it quietly unfolds.

Invisibilia presents an overarching view of Muñoz's practice for the first time in the United States, enabling visitors to actively engage with seminal works created over the past five decades. Developed in close collaboration with the artist, it encompasses the poetics, the politics, and the philosophical underpinnings of the unstable imagery Muñoz has created, which, nevertheless, becomes indelible in our imaginations.

OSCAR MUÑOZ: INVISIBILIA
EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

The scholarly catalogue accompanying *Invisibilia* will constitute the first substantive monograph on Oscar Muñoz's work in English. It aims to contribute to the field of study of conceptual photography and digital media both inside and outside of the Latin American context, and also to trace connections between Muñoz's practice and that of his contemporaries on a global scale. In addition, this will be the first publication to consider the entire five-decade span of the artist's career, beginning with his early works of the 1970s and continuing to 2019. Bilingual Spanish translations will effectively extend both the publication's impact and its international reach. The catalogue will be designed by Tracey Shiffman Associates and published by Hirmer Publishers (New York and Berlin) in association with the University of Chicago. Contributors include Dr. Natalia Brizuela, University of California, Berkeley; Joan Fontcuberta, Artist, Art Historian, and Independent Curator, Barcelona; Marta Gili, former Director of the Jeu de Paume and Independent Curator, Paris; Mariángela Mendez, Independent Curator and Professor, Facultad de Artes y Humanidades, La Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá; Dr. Mari Carmen Ramírez, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Maria Inés Rodríguez, Independent Curator and Curator at Large, MASP São Paulo; Robert Storr, Former Dean, Yale School of Art; Current Professor in the Department of Painting/Printmaking, Yale School of Art; and Dr. Alejandra Uslenghi, Northwestern University. The publication will be edited by project curator Dr. Vanessa Davidson, Shawn and Joe Lampe Curator of Latin American Art at Phoenix Art Museum.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Since the late-1980s, Oscar Muñoz has had solo museum exhibitions from Lima to Madrid, Seoul to Sydney, Buenos Aires to Paris, and Amsterdam to London. His artworks are featured in such selected museum collections as The Tate Modern (UK); The Museum of Modern Art (NY); The Daros Latinamerica Collection, (Switzerland); The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, D.C.); The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (CA); The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (TX); The Fundación "la Caixa" (Spain); The Colección Cisneros (Venezuela); and The Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango (Colombia). He lives and works in Cali, Colombia.