

T H E P O
L Y G O N



MIRADAS ALTERNAS

**DECEMBER 11, 2020 –
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**ALEJANDRA ARAGÓN
JULIANA ALVARADO
KORAL CARBALLO
MARICEU ERTHAL
SONIA MADRIGAL**

mirada feminine noun

‘look’, ‘gaze’, describes both the act of looking and a way of looking

alterna feminine adjective (derivative of **alternativa**)

‘alternative’, available as another possibility, an action that is different or independent from official or hegemonic models

Featuring lens-based work by five Mexican women artists, this exhibition offers insights into the concept of *Miradas Alternas* through photographic representations of violence in contemporary Mexico. Operating at the intersections of evidence and interpretation, these artists dissolve the boundaries between visual arts, documentary photography and photojournalism to provide other possibilities for rendering visible an ongoing crisis that, despite its unimaginable horror, is so full of images. Media oversaturation of morbid imagery threatens to normalise these tragedies. Relying on a traditional idea of photography as a transparent medium that objectively captures pictures of the real, news photographs have become protagonists in portraying the country’s critical situation. However, the visual language common to documentary and press photography is one that re-presents, and thus reifies trauma. Regardless of the intentions of those behind the lens, such imagery further disseminates the presence of violence throughout society.

Conventional documentary practices have predominantly approached the camera as a device that collects evidence, developing a forensic gaze that is focused on proofs such as wounded and suffering bodies. Evidence, in a forensic sense, is valued in terms of unmediated objectivi-

ty, scientific certainty and technological transparency, aspects that resonate with a traditional rhetoric of photography as a purveyor of realism and truth. Despite being long-questioned, this rhetoric still permeates hegemonic visual narratives that exist not only within a regime of objective truth but also one of explicit visibility – a type of visuality that is predominant in mass media.¹

It is crucial to be mindful that images produced through a forensic paradigm, beyond fulfilling their informative purpose, partake in the disciplinary agenda of violence. Anthropologist Rita Segato calls this condition the pedagogy of cruelty whereby “all the acts and practices that teach, accustom, and program subjects turn forms of life into things.”

Segato argues that violence is expressive more than instrumental: it communicates, exhibits and consolidates power and domination. From a feminist and postcolonial perspective, she analyzes the imbricated relationship between violence and patriarchy within armed conflicts like the ongoing drug wars in Mexico, and explains how violence against women, more than simply collateral damage, is a strategic objective, turning women’s bodies into the territories where wars are waged.²

If violence is always an expression of power that uses sensationalizing and gruesome images as a disciplinary tool, then the medium of photography is prone to reproduce that message of dominance. This is why when photographing violence, one is inevitably dealing with the ethics and the politics of representation.

Aware of the risk of partaking in the dissemination of violence through photography, Juliana Alvarado, Alejandra Aragón, Koral Carballo, Mariceu Erthal and Sonia

Madrigal have developed critical and creative strategies to photograph violence differently. Deliberately avoiding re-traumatizing representations, their work operates through evocative metaphors and allegories that speak to issues of femicide, domestic violence, enforced disappearance, and the pervasive state of criminal violence that prevails in Mexico. In various ways, many of the works in *Miradas Alternas* draw strongly on the evocative power of written and spoken language. In Alvarado's *Name Them* and Madrigal's *Death Rises in the East* and video *You*, textual elements animate visual compositions. In the postcards from *You*, the pictures are grounded by descriptions on the verso, similar to Carballo's inclusion of a text message with the array of photographs in *At the Wrong Time*. In other cases, like Aragon's *Premonitory Self-Portrait* and Erthal's photo-book project *Letters to Gemma*, words are a core component of the narrative flow.

For these artists, photography is participatory and an active observation. Often using performative strategies, they approach photography as an embodied action or a relational process. Subverting the forensic paradigm, their photographs operate more like testimony – a subjective account – rather than evidence; and instead of explicitly showing violence, they allude to its effects and related affects. As allegories of loss, grief, rage, and fear, their images evoke the absence of missing and murdered women and tell stories that claim spaces of presence, visibility and justice.

Images provide a way to structure thought, to approach knowledge, and to engage with reality. While it is true that images do not supply weapons for politi-

cal battles, as pointed out by philosopher Jaques Rancière, they do “help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.”³ With the purpose of partaking in a reconfiguration of visibility, *Miradas Alternas* seeks to provide a different way of seeing some of the most pressing issues unfolding from Mexico's violence crisis in order to raise awareness, and most importantly, to think critically about the situation. As Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza has proven in her “grieving writings”, changing and reshaping our systems of representation opens the possibility to also modify our social landscapes: it opens the possibility to realign what can be thought about the societies we live in, enabling us to imagine our realities otherwise.⁴

ANDREA SÁNCHEZ IBARROLA CURATOR

¹By mass media I refer to the main mediums of mass communication such as television, radio and newspapers, but also to the increasing use of online communication circuits such as social media platforms, blogs, and instant messaging apps. Mass communication has drastically changed over the past two decades, with the increasing use of these technological developments. The period of time in which these shifts occurred is the same period in which the war against drugs in Mexico has been unfolding. The increasing speed and pervasiveness with which images of this war circulate, is a phenomenon closely related to the changes in current mass communication dynamics.

²Rita Segato, “A Manifesto in Four Themes,” trans. Ramsey McGlazer, *Critical Times*, vol.1 no. 1, (2018): 212-225. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-1.1.212>

³Jaques Rancière, “The intolerable image,” *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London & New York: Verso, 2009): 103

⁴Cristina Rivera Garza, *Grieving. Dispatches from a Wounded Country*, trans. Sarah Booker (New York: Feminist Press, 2020): 9-10.

EXHIBITED WORKS

JULIANA ALVARADO

Name Them, 2017

Inkjet prints

Courtesy of the artist

ALEJANDRA ARAGÓN

Premonitory Self-Portrait, 2017-2018

Inkjet prints, printed matter, collected objects, Spotify playlist and personal archive items

Courtesy of the artist

KORAL CARBALLO

At the Wrong Time, 2015-2017

Inkjet prints and text reproduction

Courtesy of the artist

MARICEU ERTHAL

Letters to Gemma, 2017-2020

Inkjet prints and photobook (digital version)

Courtesy of the artist

SONIA MADRIGAL

Death Rises in the East, 2014 - ongoing

Inkjet prints

Courtesy of the artist

You, 2017

Video (sound, colour, 9'49" minutes) and postcards

Courtesy of the artist

BIOGRAPHIES

Juliana Alvarado (b. Cuautla, 1990) is a visual artist interested in examining social, economic and political systems in relation to space, architecture and built environments. She holds degrees in visual arts by the National Fine Arts School (UNAM) and by the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos (UAEM). In 2016 she won an artistic residency at Oficina de Arte (Mexico City) and more recently she was selected as one of the top 50 emerging Latin American photographers listed by *Distintas Latitudes*. Her work was selected for Mexico's Photography Biennial (2018) and FotoMéxico Festival (2019).

Alejandra Aragón (b. Ciudad Juárez, 1983) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work addresses the identities of border regions and how territories determine one's experience. She holds a degree in Visual Arts and Business from the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez (UACJ). She was part of the Photography Production Seminar at Centro de la Imagen in México City in 2017. Her work has been shown in multiple exhibitions throughout Mexico, South America and Europe. Her documentary film *Invisible Nights* was included in "Coordenadas" at Ambulante Film Festival in 2018. She was awarded the Young Artists Mexican Fine Arts Gran (FONCA) and a film production grant from the Tribeca Film Institute If/Then Program. She is currently a participant in the 2020 Joop Swart Masterclass.

Koral Carballo (b. Poza Rica, 1987) seeks for new visual narratives merging photojournalism and visual arts to address issues of identity, land and violence. She is a recipient of multiple awards, including: Bronx Documentary Center (2020), Women Photograph + Getty Images (2019), Magnum Foundation Fund (2018), Moving Walls 25 by Open Society Foundation (2018), First Prize in the Latin American Colloquium held by Fundación Pedro Meyer (2017), selected for Mexico's Photography Biennial (2018), twice Adelante Grantee & Fellow of the International Women's Media Foundation (2017 and 2018), and twice the Mexican Fine Arts Gran (FONCA) (2015 and 2018). Carballo is a co-founder of *Mirar Distinto*, a documentary photo-festival based in Veracruz, Mexico. She is currently part of multiple lens-based collectives (TRASLUZ, Ruda y Colectiva, Foto Fémimas, Fotógrafas de México, Diversify Photo and Women Photograph).

Mariceu Erthal (b. Querétaro, 1989) born and based in Querétaro, Erthal uses documentary photography as a bridge to reflect and question humanitarian issues that traverses Latin American territories. Merging visual and written languages to reflect on social, political and autobiographical issues, her storytelling practice follows a process of self-exploration using empathy as a methodology. She is one of the 2020 W. Eugene Smith Fund Grant Recipients and her work has been published by *The Guardian*, Ph Museum, *The Marshall project*, *Witness by World Press Photo*, among others. In 2019 she was selected by World Press Photo's 6x6 Global Talent Program, and was awarded the Women Photograph portfolio review.

Sonia Madrigal (b. Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, 1978) lives and works in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, one of the districts of the State of México of the capital's Greater Metropolitan Area. With a strong focus in the region where she is based, Madrigal uses multiple visual narratives to analyze the intersections of gendered bodies, violence and territory, at individual and collective levels. In 2018 her work was selected for Mexico's Photography Biennial (2018). She is currently a recipient of the Mexican Fine Arts Extended Grant (SNCA-FONCA), and was a recipient of the Young Artists Mexican Fine Arts Grant (FONCA, 2013-2014). Her work has been shown internationally in multiple exhibitions in México, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, Francia, Italia, España y Estados Unidos; and it has been published in Harper's Magazine (Nueva York, 2020), Aperture Magazine (Nueva York, 2019) and The Guardian (Inglaterra, 2017).

Andrea Sánchez Ibarrola (b. Cuernavaca, 1988) is an MA candidate in Critical and Curatorial Studies at the University of British Columbia who is interested in developing practices of memory, social reconstruction and justice using her curatorial work as a medium. She holds a degree in Art Restoration and many years of experience working in community-oriented conservation projects, as well as in contemporary art conservation. She has worked for leading contemporary art institutions in Mexico, such as MUAC at the National Autonomous University, and Fundación Jumex. With a lifelong relationship with photography, Sanchez Ibarrola has used her graduate studies as an opportunity to dive into its theoretical study and to further explore this visual language from the curatorial perspective.

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