

Naming the Unspeakable: Art and the Truth Commission

The Truth Commission has begun a series of interviews called Naming the Unspeakable with different Colombian artists, all of whom have made the reflection of the armed conflict integral to their work. To date, six meetings have been held to discuss the role of art as a form of recognition and a means to understand the armed conflict. These meetings take as a starting point, the fundamental role of art in Colombia as a means to resist and witness the horrors lived amid violence. The Commission also recognises that art, through its many languages, can delve into the depths of the human condition.

Art and Recognition

The different artists invited to the Naming the Unspeakable series agree that art plays a fundamental role in providing spaces for the recognition of victims and an understanding of the dynamics of the conflict. Doris Salcedo argues that the function of the artist is precisely to go behind the marks left by violence, reconstructing those who are victims and helping make sense of the conflict. Art is then a means to restore what is damaged, dignify those who lost their lives, or whose life was affected. Pablo Montoya, a writer, uses literature to reflect on the breakdown of the ties and fundamental values of coexistence amid the most challenging economic conditions. He does this through a story about a mass grave known as La Escombrera (The Dump), in Medellín. He adopts the perspective of popular sectors and the relationship they had with the different forms of violence in which they were immersed.

For these artists, history is their greatest ally in making sense of the armed conflict, understanding its origins and finding antecedents of resistance and reconciliation. This historical vision, employing a long timeframe, finds a breeding ground in the colonial period for the greatest horrors, but also glimpses of hope. Pablo Montoya proposes that violence is an inheritance from the conquest process when the Spaniards imposed themselves on the Amerindian communities. In the literature from the colonial period, he finds an excitement around the imposition process that shaped founding myths that mark the subsequent violence that Colombia experienced. The actress Patricia Ariza, a former Patriotic Union member, proposes in her various plays an interpretation of the famous Rebellion of the Commoners of 1781 as an earlier example of resistance.



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The Victims, the Axis of Reflection

The victims are the meeting point between artistic reflection and the armed conflict. The need to give them a voice, to recognise, and to dignify them permeates the creative work of all the artists involved. In particular, the work of Doris Salcedo explores with great depth, and from different perspectives and historical conjunctures, the problem of memory and recognition. Salcedo talks about the rupture in her work "La casa viuda" (The widowed house), created by displacement and nostalgia for the life abandoned. In "Plegaria muda" (Silent Prayer), Salcedo tackles the extrajudicial executions carried out by the Colombian army to reflect on the place that murdered youths had in society. She is seeking to dignify their lives, in contrast to the mass graves in which they were buried. Other themes explored by the artist include the temporal break that involves murder, the memory of forgotten lives, and key moments of the conflict.

In the case of the filmmaker Laura Mora, as a victim of the conflict, her art is itself an act of liberation and catharsis. As she explains, her film "Matar a Jesus" (Kill Jesus) was intrinsically linked to her personal history as her father was murdered in 2002. This film is an attempt to understand the motives and background of her father's killer. However, her testimony goes much further and allows us to delve into the deep dilemmas that victims face once they come face to face with the conflict. In her interview with the Commission, Laura shares her complex relationship with her city, Medellín; how art became an escape route to undertake a trip to Australia, where she would live a long time; and how the realisation of the film took her to Buenos Aires, her father's favourite city, allowing her to finish mourning.

Embrace Dialogue celebrates the Truth Commission's initiative. We recognise the potential of art within the process of recognising victims of the armed conflict. Embrace Dialogue also invites civil society to learn about the Commission's project and to draw inspiration from it.



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