Silent Witness: The Photographic Art of Milagros de la Torre

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Under the Black Sun, 1991–1993. Hand-dyed toned gelatin silver print, Mercurochrome. Variable dimensions

The crossing of borders is an inherent feature in the work of Milagros de la Torre. This distinguished conceptualist photographic artist is as at home on both sides of the Atlantic as she is in North and South America. Traversing aesthetic boundaries is also a characteristic given within her practice. In addition, de la Torre tends to blend and merge genres in her work. In fact, she possesses something of the spirit of the painter. In several of her early series, such as *Under the Black Sun* (1991–1993), painting, the hand-done application of substances that dramatically change the tone of the photograph, is an integral part of the process of elaboration of the image.[1] In the photographic cycle *It All Stays in the Family* (1994), we find further instance of the coalescing of the boundaries between the visual effects of photography and painting. Shown to the public for the first time in this exhibition, these photographs (representing her parents at different times of their lives) employ an abundance of sfumato-like shadow and display a strong bent toward the use of artisanal effects, mingled with those that refer to quick, commercial methods. De la Torre uses vintage paper to print these photos, adding a sense of the traditional and referencing the hand-made. By contrast, the torn lower edges of the images of each of the works (all five of which should be seen together and considered as a single piece) suggest rapidly processed photo-mat images. This tension between the "fine art" and the mass-produced auras of her works is an element of which she is conscious.

It All Stays in the Family stands as a testimony to domestic transitions and mutations. The concept of bearing witness to events that develop because of specific political or social circumstances is equally apparent in de la Torre's work. While the artist readily explains the circumstances under which each of her series has been created since she began working in the early 1990s, it is completely possible for us to view them in ignorance of the facts of such occurrences as the terror of the Shining Path in her native Peru or the Spanish Inquisition's censorship of texts, while grasping the pervasiveness of dark forces of human nature and the artist's reactions to the depredations of mankind that have shaped the course of her work. The viewer intuits an inherent sensitivity in her work to Michel Foucault's articulation of the nature of watchfulness and all-encompassing observation, attested by her interest in viewing, reviewing and being present in the moment of certain actions, witnessing them and codifying them in her images.

De la Torre's art has often been examined with reference mainly to itself and its own messages, but it is time to look at it within a much larger panorama of recent (and historical) art and photographic history throughout the Western Hemisphere and on both sides of the Atlantic. Within the past decade, there has been a good deal of attention paid to documentary photography depicting warfare, urban degradation and torture. Matthew Brady's documentation of the American Civil War, Lewis Hine's depictions of child labor and the terrifying photographs by American soldiers serving at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War are but a few instances of images that have been dissected and analyzed not only for their shock value but what they "mean" within the larger flow of documenting things that many people would prefer not to see. The writings of Luc Sante on the photojournalist Weegee or the discussion by Thierry de Duve of the photographs of victims of the dictator Pol Pot during the 1970s are but several recent examples that have opened our understanding of the meanings of photographs in the context of observing the "unobservable."[2] The recent exhibition catalogue *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera since 1870* provides a model of scholarship and intelligent presentation of a variety of images that were either taken without the subjects' knowledge and depict things they would only do when believing themselves unobserved, or through deliberate projects of surveillance and documentation.[3]

Some of these approaches to the photography of terror, pain, anguish (exterior or interior) and conflict are models we might fruitfully examine to understand more completely the qualities that de la Torre has been pursuing throughout her career. Pain is a pervasive theme in her work. Nonetheless, we are never shown active or aggressive suffering. Physical or psychic discomfort or trauma is couched under layer after layer of both physical covering and metaphorical innuendo. Perhaps the series in which the artist comes closest to demonstrating for our eyes, as well as for our skin (*skin* itself, the protective layer covering the rest of the body is indeed one of the most essential themes that pervades the work of de la Torre) is *Sharp-edged,* executed in 2000. These photographs, discreet in size, subtle and yet potentially menacing, demonstrate weapons, principally knives. They may have come from a drug bust or simply the sale drawer of a weapons dealer. We are given no context for these elements that invade our conscience once we have seen them. In *Sharp-edged,* the objects seem to float in space, as if in an eerie x-ray of an as-yet-unborn child in amniotic fluid. Darkness/blackness swirls around them; they are stationery yet they appear to fly through the air, about to strike an unknown target on their own energy.

In one of the examples from the *Sharp-edged* series, seven knives lie on a surface, like sentinels guarding a place or a person. Depicting them makes the viewer confront their own reactions to, fears of and desires for pain. These photographs, like virtually all of de la Torre's work, are as much about desire as they are, in this instance, about pain. The phenomenon of wishing for discomfort, hoping for an event that will provide an opportunity to absorb or inflict pain, is inherent here. The photographs are not benign; they cause us to remember the most frightening moments of our lives – or they allow us passage into the dark realms in which the individual can only resort to pain. Susan Sontag discusses the roles of pain and suffering in the photography of well-known events.[4] She explores the collective experience often established through the observation of the photographic image, an experience that, she argues, dulls the subjectivity of pain through constant repeated viewing: "Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy; for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality."[5]

De la Torre, conversely, considers precisely the opposite effects. She is interested in the highly personal and subjective impact on an *individual* beholder. While interested in collectivity, she conceptualizes the group as composed of hundreds or thousands of individual experiences of perception. In *Sharp-edged,* she "speaks" as eloquently as any critic about pain and its consequences but on an intensely personal and interior level. Indeed, the notion of "interior reactions" to events and thoughts often lies at the root of de la Torre's art. This is not to make any facile statement about "universalism" or "easy legibility" in her photography. Much of her work is difficult to decipher and requires serious pondering and un-packing of meaning. Her art is not about pleasure, although it *is* often about beauty.

Beauty, of course, can be deceiving and often masks pain, discomfort, trauma or psychological wounds. Such is the case with two of the artist's most enigmatic series. Begun in 2003, *Bleus* (or "bruises") are small format images that are among the first works by de la Torre in color (discounting her application of a red, Mercurochrome-based tint to some of the faces in her earlier project *Under the Black Sun*). These images are extraordinary examples of evasiveness and mystification. The viewer encounters them not as single photographs but as components in an exquisite artist's book complete with a shocking pink wooden cover and rubber-band fasteners fashioned by the distinguished designer Pierre Charpin. We open what appears to be an object containing erotic or sexualized components. Inside, we encounter a series of provocative pages comprising de

la Torre's mysterious renditions of purple and pink areas of color on the right-hand pages and architecturally placed literary vignettes by the writer José Manuel Prieto on the left. Only after a concentrated viewing can we discern that each of the photos represents a bruise to the skin, a *bleu* in French. These images reside in the nether area of the sinister and surprising.

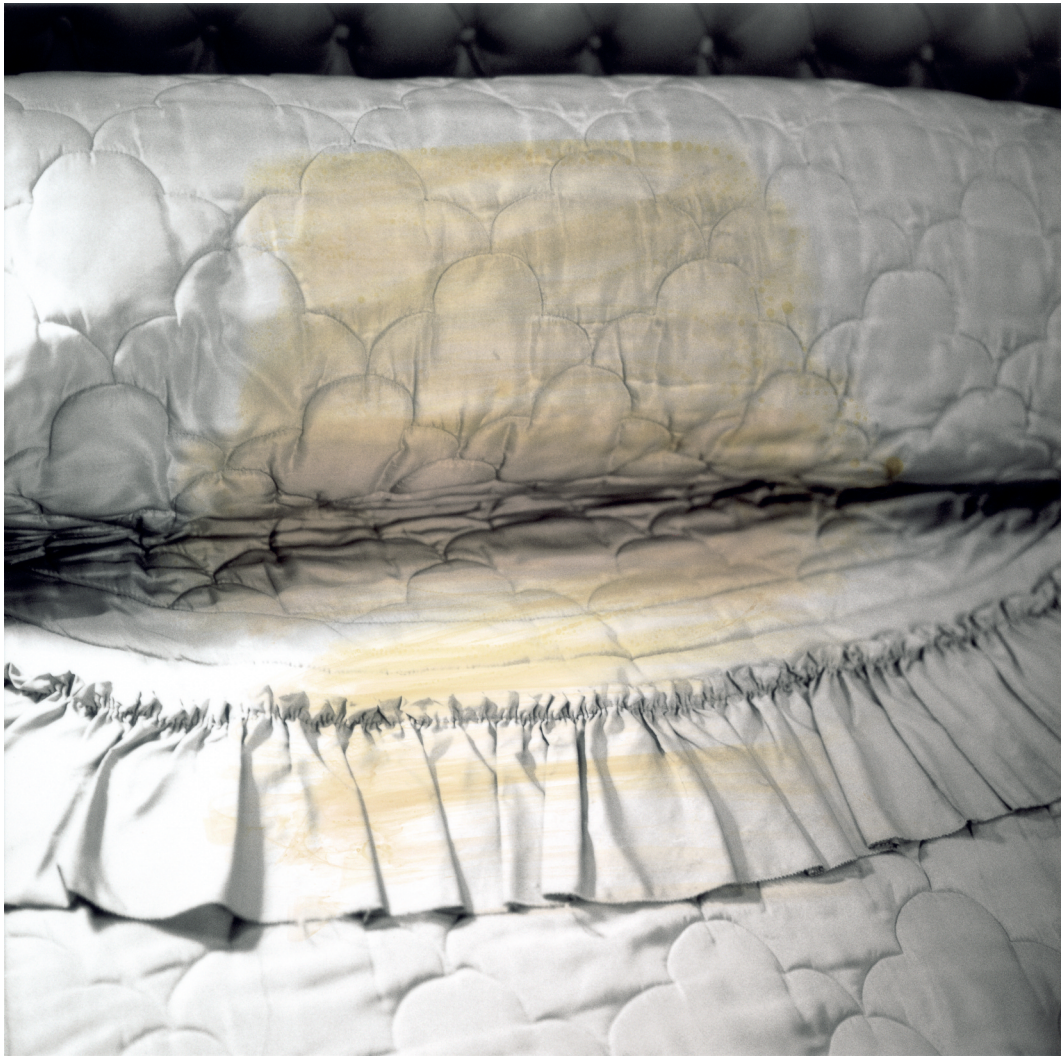
A pastel blue ground serves as the backdrop for the study of the hand and its skin in another series, which is ultimately related to *Bleus.* At first glance, the 2010 works that comprise *Imprint* could be conceived as semi-abstract forms, yet, on closer inspection, the viewer understands these to be close-ups of wounds on the hand of the artist, inflicted by her own teeth. We might be reminded of the violent body art of Chris Burden, Hannah Wilke or the performance artist ORLAN, yet while de la Torre belongs in part to this performative photographic vein in contemporary art, she is distanced from its harshest manifestations through the discreet size of her works and especially their subtlety. The artist has said that "in *Bleus* an inversion of representation is carried out. The trace of pain is transformed by photography into a sensual and colorful landscape, which creates tensions between the familiar and the unexpected, between violence and biting poetry, when appearances tend to deceive."[6]

In viewing the totality of her work, we are again obliged to consider the references to agony and sorrow, not only on an internal, personal level as we see in *Imprint,* but on a collective scale. Throughout her career, de la Torre has been concerned about the effects of trauma on large swaths of the population. Far from the photojournalism associated with any particular event within the context of warfare or natural disaster, de la Torre ruminates about larger issues of society's collective approach to its circumstances, encapsulating them within series of images transcending specificity and adumbrating some of the fundamental causes and consequences of shared unease. Several of her most dramatic series done in this spirit grow out of her own experiences in places that have suffered long periods of political domination by a dictator, as in the case of Franco's Spain, or that have experienced waves of crippling violence, as in the case of Peru during the most violent years of the activities of the Shining Path. While there are undoubtedly some personal ramifications to her choices, there is never any sense of cultural or geographic specificity in her works. (She could just as easily have created a project based in the stimuli of events in Manhattan, where she currently lives, or anywhere else her travels have taken her.) Moreover, it is not the direct contact with events or people that she seeks to suggest in any of her series but the larger effects and shared distress triggered by a force.

The series known simply as *FF* came about in a way that took the artist by surprise. In 2007, de la Torre was invited to participate in a collective exhibition in Spain called *Mirada Madrid,* in which fifteen Latin American artists were invited to the Spanish capital to interpret what they saw there. Eschewing local geography or anything with particular relevance to the observed urban reality, de la Torre remembered the impact of military life on her early years (her father was a significant figure within the Lima police force and played a major role in the anti-terror campaign there) and focused on the pervasive legacy of the Franco dictatorship. While there is a wealth of photographic documentation concerning the activities of Franco from the time of the Nationalist takeover in 1939 until his death in 1975, the artist desired a first-hand confrontation with the *material* evidence of his life and examined the deeply personal inside story of his existence. De la Torre was granted limited access to the personal archive of Franco's possessions, which are kept at the Palacio del Pardo outside Madrid. For a few fraught and emotional hours, she had an intimate encounter with the things that literally touched the dictator's life: his clothing, military uniform, the pillows on his bed, the table on which he signed official documents (including thousands of death warrants during the troubled post–Civil War period) and, perhaps most poignantly, the *prie-dieu* at which this pious Catholic said his morning and evening prayers. In characteristic fashion, she chose these objects on which to focus her photographic inquiry into the most intimate essence of a man who shaped the history of his country for almost forty years. She has explained her strategy in this project: "I wanted to work [with] close-up images in which the limited visual field brings out only a tiny detail clearly, leaving the rest almost to fade into abstraction. There is a treatment of notions of global and personal history and the marks imprinted by both on the collective unconscious. At the same time, concepts of stain, shadow and sign are treated, especially in terms of photographic language; each black-and-white photograph shows a manual intervention made with brush strokes with sepia color, evoking photographs of the past, the beginnings of photography and the early understanding of the medium."[7]

Among the most pernicious effects of the Franco dictatorship was the widespread censorship of texts, the need for experimental literature to be published abroad and the exile of many prominent writers. Considering these circumstances, de la Torre investigated earlier historical instances of expurgation and suppression of ideas in Spain. While visiting Salamanca for an exhibition of her work, she was introduced to the extraordinary collection at the University's library, which holds, in a secret cabinet, a collection of books, religious and literary texts that

FF (Lapel), 2007–2008. Hand sepia intervention on gelatin silver print. 39 x 39 in. (100 x 100 cm)



FF (Pillow), 2007–2008. Hand sepia intervention on gelatin silver print. 39 x 39 in. (100 x 100 cm)

had been censored during the long period of the Spanish Inquisition. The result of her research is one of the largest and most imposing series of photographic documents of silencing. Each piece in *Censured* (2000) measures 40 by 48 inches and examines a double folio of individual books whose words have been altered by a variety of strokes of a pen, broad washes of ink or deep black squares obliterating entire paragraphs.

This series comprises an anti-archive: a negation of text, a denial of information and a repudiation of ideas. The large scale of these works suggests a painterly surface, and indeed the original manuscripts themselves are transformed into a series of patterns created by quasi-calligraphic or block-like areas of sepia or black. Yet there is nothing conventionally artistic about them; they stand, as represented by de la Torre, as mute witnesses to expurgation and control. The power of communication is silenced by the power of authority. Observing these defaced pages, we enter into a dialogue with the same silence imposed upon peoples today, from the consequences for individual artists who anger state authorities to writers who attempt to describe their reactions to oppression.

If in *Censured* we encounter the obliteration of text, in the 2004 series *Fears* we struggle to read the words that comprise the heart of the piece. Unique in the *oeuvre* of de la Torre, *Fears* is composed of archival digital prints in cotton paper. These works are not photographs but dreams, or more precisely, nightmares made visible through words. The artist is able to approximate the color (or non-color) – between purple, black and gray – that we distinguish upon closing our eyes (to sleep in fear, in denial of reality). As experiments in evocations of color these works bring the artist in close proximity to the techniques and effects of painting. When seen together on a wall, they recall the meditative, haunting effects of the dark tonalities of the paintings for the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, where Mark Rothko's work forms a backdrop for our deepest of personal ruminations on life and death.

As the result of her digital research, the artist was able to impose upon this negative color, a series of fragments of quotations from anonymous residents of Mexico City whose lives had been interrupted, threatened or traumatized by violence. The fragments of interviews or conversations, printed in almost the same shade of gray/purple as the background, can only be perceived by approaching the images and attempting to read the words that eventually reveal themselves through the gloomy darkness. We must have a one-on-one encounter with

these text/image objects to comprehend their messages. In these pieces, the words struggles to emerge into our consciousness, thus creating a dramatically opposite effect from that achieved in *Censured.*

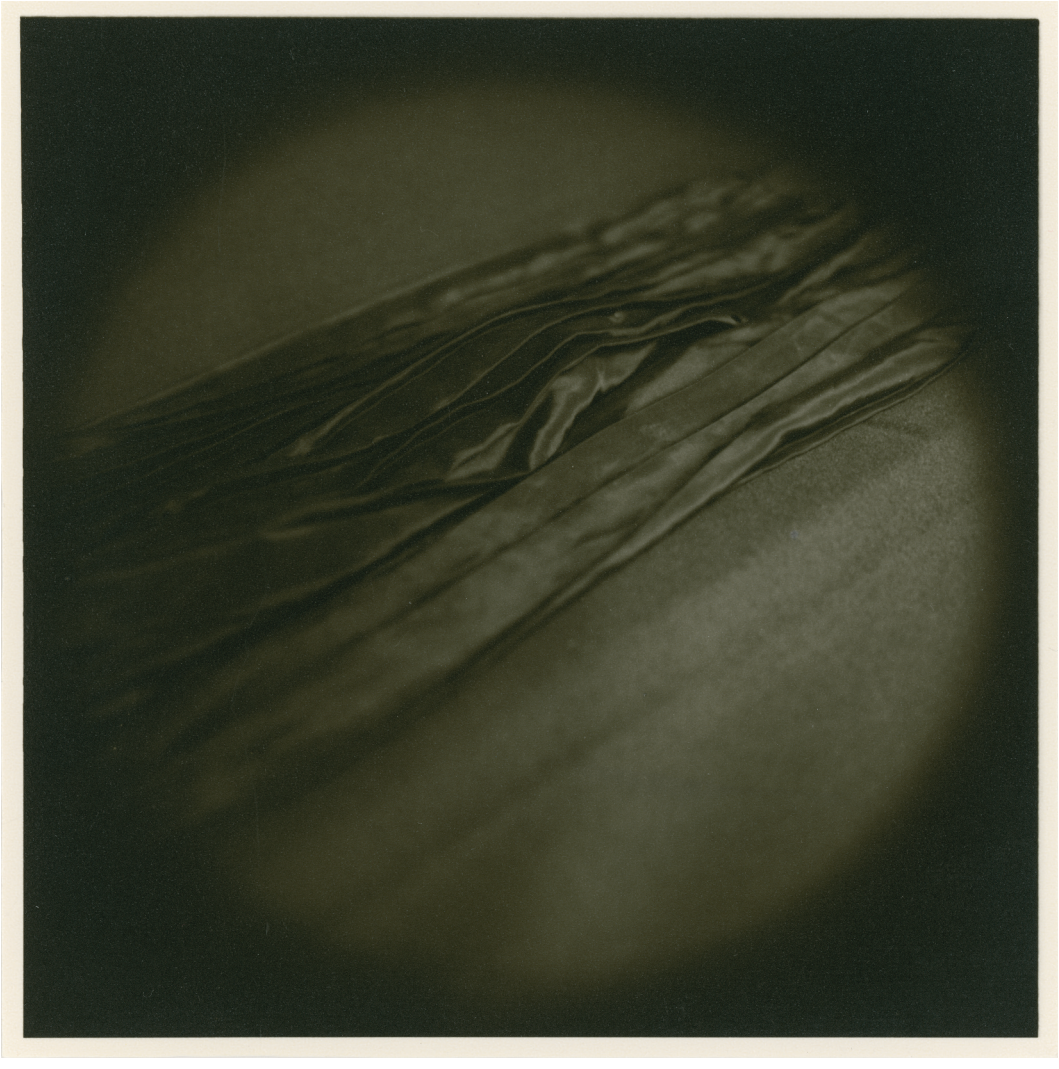
Few examples of contemporary photography have evoked or displayed an archive more dramatically than de la Torre's 1996 series *The Lost Steps.* These photographs take their name from *Los pasos perdidos,* the corridor in the Palace of Justice in Lima that connects the courts with detention and jail cells. The artist gained access to the archive of this municipal institution and worked with its contents to extraordinary advantage. This is not simply an archive of paper documents but a repository of all manner of physical testimonies to the crimes for which individuals were judged. De la Torre worked with the archivist who had labored there for some thirty years and knew each case intimately. The archivist guided her to some of the most dramatic as well as mundane objects, in each of which one feels the weight of a personal story with tragic consequences. De la Torre has stated that "*The Lost Steps* are photographs of apparently everyday objects that were submitted as evidence in trials for terrorist acts, crimes of passion, and other felonies. Taken with a nineteenth-century technique [in which] the development with the lens did not entirely cover the format of the photographic negative, hence creating a dark aura around the photographed object, conferring on it a halo of mystery, an emotional charge which alludes to the dark side of human nature, to the traces and absence of the criminal."[8]

These objects include several forks and a spoon used in a test for cocaine, a love letter written just prior to a suicide, a bloodied shirt taken from the lifeless body after a police shootout, the fake national identity card of a notorious terrorist, a belt used by a psychologist to strangle one of his clients, as well as several mundane items that signify not only a violent act but an individual life ruined by violence. The inertness and quietude surrounding each photographed item removes them from time and place. They take on the aura of sanctification – as relics of evil and despair. Yet de la Torre's approach to the materialization of criminality and malevolence has nothing to do with the sensationalism of artists who work on a much larger scale to draw attention not only to the malevolent acts at the core of their works. As is the case of *FF,* the artist's restraint is the most remarkable feature of these images. We can well imagine de la Torre as a silent witness to past and virtually forgotten events that shaped or deformed scores of lives. She observes, recounts, refashions and creates for us a visualization of the destitution and despair that remains within the aura of each individual

component of this series of photographs. When first seen, these images tell a story, but they remain in our minds as traces of ideas and shadows of presences.[9]

One of the most absorbing and sobering images within *The Lost Steps* is a photograph of a dress worn by a woman who suspiciously fell from a high floor of the Lima Sheraton Hotel after a argument with her lover. The black satin garment lies on a black background, the image a study of contrasts of similar tones. The dress is composed of a series of wrinkles that run horizontally; it is captured within the "halo of light" as the artist has described it (in conversation with the author), and made into a relic of abjection. Yet we also remember that the dress was once a garment that helped project a person's body out into the world; it glamourized it and added to its sensual attraction. It served, in a sense, as another layer of skin covering and emphasizing the curves of the woman's torso and thighs. These layering effects – whether they be in the form of skin or cloth – form a fundamental theme throughout de la Torre's work. The layering of ink over a text prohibits it from being read. The imprint of the teeth on skin calls attention to the fragility of the organ of the body covering our internal structure. Clothing itself frequently makes its appearance in the art of de la Torre as a principal subject. She recalls being driven to school as a child in an armored car by a driver with a gun at his side to ward off possible attacks of terrorists or drug gangs who had been the subject of her father's investigations and prosecutions. This and a wide variety of other related experiences have found their way into her artistic imagination, manifesting themselves in images of protective layers of clothing.

The 2008 series *Bulletproof* references her familiarity and fascination with uniforms. None of these garments are uniforms *per se,* although the series *Embedded* (2007) did show twenty-one arms-resistant uniforms worn by soldiers, police officers and government officials. Having researched catalogues and websites from across the world, de la Torre uncovered a wealth of sources for clothing that might appear fashionable, even elegant, but were designed primarily to ward off bullets, knife attacks and shrapnel. Displayed on simple wooden hangers against a stark white background, the vests, shirts and jackets that form the core of this series are observed in a laconic manner. They weigh little and have a completely normal appearance that would make their wearer blend into the crowd. Yet at the same time these clothes protect and repel. They are uniforms for the dangers of modern life and its attendant violence, which is as metaphorical as it is real. Each day we prepare ourselves for a constant barrage of visual, audial and emotional elements that may wound. De la Torre



“Skirt worn by Marita Alpaca when she was thrown by her lover from the 8th floor of the Sheraton Hotel in Lima. She was found to be pregnant at the autopsy.”

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

acknowledges the need for protective garb and proffers it to us in the most palpable form possible by projecting these garments directly into our space.

The garments in *Bulletproof,* like the symbols of past violence in *The Lost Steps* are unaccompanied by extraneous objects. They rely on their own merits of communication to connect with the viewer and tell their stories. Such singularity and solitude is evoked in monumentalized form in *The Last Things,* perhaps the most confrontational – and devotional – of de la Torre's series. In these three single, imposing photographs, individual objects stand out against a stark, black background. They hover in space as specters of blurry dreams. The format is that of the triptych, with all its medieval religious connotations. As in her other series, the central figure is an article of clothing. It might be interpreted as a shroud, perhaps the famous Shroud of Turin, or it may be a reference to the veil of Saint Veronica, who wiped the sweaty, bloody brow of Christ as He carried the Cross to Golgotha, for which she was rewarded with a miraculous imprint of His image on the cloth. In fact, the imposing garment that forms the focal point of de la Torre's triptych is a straitjacket, an article of clothing used only in *extremis* to restrain the most dangerous and disturbed patients.

These decontextualized implements in *The Last Things* were all objects found by the artist in another archival setting. Unlike the library of the University of Salamanca or the archives of Lima's Palace of Justice, the Larco Herrera psychiatric institution in Peru's capital, from which the objects come, held their outdated equipment in low regard and these objects were in danger of being discarded when the artist found them and received permission to photograph them. The other two items in the triptych rest on tables, suggesting altars. Yet instead of ecclesiastical objects resting upon them, we find an old tray that once held surgical instruments (the tray is now rusted and its white discolored with age), as well as a rubber ball used in exercises with patients to relax their muscles. In *The Last Things,* the artist employs these objects to explore their shapes and textures, yet, read more deeply, they are visual aids for the viewer in contemplating anxiety and despair. These photographs represent a culminating depth of emotion, while, at the same time, establishing an ineffable impermeability, bringing the viewer into intense proximity to the scene. They also maintain a coolness and distance inherent in their having been created in a modern world of skepticism and irony.

After an extended sojourn in Europe, de la Torre returned to Peru in the early 1990s, eager to re-encounter some of the photographic traditions of her own

country. In Peru's colonial Andean capital of Cuzco, the photographer Martín Chambi developed his career in the early twentieth century. Principally celebrated for his portraits, both formal and informal, of members of many echelons of Andean society, Chambi is the best-known artist of the Cuzco School of Photography. While in Cuzco, de la Torre became close friends with the artist's daughter Julia, who showed her Chambi's studio and let her examine his negatives as well as the work of his fellow photographers. She was also introduced to the practice of street photography by which itinerant photographers took snapshots of individuals for identity cards. De la Torre has eloquently explained her introduction to this form of photographic work as well as her own transformations of it:

"When I came to Cuzco. . . I found a very interesting way of photographing, elementary but deeply intriguing. I'm referring to the technique of the street photographers, who shoot directly onto photographic paper using a box camera, not only economizing on material but also producing immediate results. The exposed paper is developed in the camera itself, with the aid of developer and diluted fixer stored in small recycled tins. As the paper negative is removed to dry in the intense mountain sunlight, a layer of Mercurochrome. . . is automatically applied to the skin of the subject. This negative with red retouching is then rephotographed with the same camera, in order to produce, through the same developing process, a positive or common I.D. photo. The innocent retouching lightens the skin of the subject, producing not only a 'racial improvement,' but also an aesthetic, economic, and even cultural one, in the belief that a person with fair skin intrinsically represents all of these qualities."

The result of these photographic investigations and the re-invention of this classic street technique was the *Under the Black Sun* series (1991–1993). These photographs, which have been included in numerous international exhibitions, are among her best known and most visually haunting works. Printed on both small (original) scale as well as in monumental blow-up versions, the pale, virtually ghostlike faces loom out at us through a haze of gray. These individuals (and they are very much individuals even though they are anonymous to us) are indelible presences. On one hand, they may be understood (especially when seen one after another in a straight line in a gallery or museum setting) either as victims of a crime, or perhaps criminals in a police lineup. The serial quality of this cycle recalls the work of artists like Andy Warhol, who created series of famous heads that may be viewed as a constant parade of the same image

Under the Black Sun, 1991–1993. Gelatin silver print. Variable dimensions

shown one after another. Yet there is a deep gulf between Warhol's celebrity paintings (based on photographs) and de la Torre's anonymous subjects, who were caught, by chance, in her makeshift photographic studio set up on the streets of Cuzco.

In her remarks on *Under the Black Sun,* the artist insists on the racializing quality of the street photographers' practice in which a substance is applied to the image to make their skin whiter and thus raise them, at least artificially, on the precarious racial ladder in which every rung towards whiteness represents a step toward both prosperity and social acceptance. This false paradigm is inherently recognized by de la Torre, who references the "whitening" technique while ultimately rendering her subjects black by presenting their images as negatives. These figures are objectified and removed from the realm of the observed world. They are specters, phantoms of the universe of images whose inhabitants have passed into a realm of the ethereal. We can see them, observe their features, but we can communicate with them only through the obscuring veil of art.

1 Please note that I use the English language titles of the artist's series. Spanish titles will be found in the catalogue portion of this publication.

2 See, for example, Luc Sante *Unknown Weegee* (New York: International Center for Photography and Steidl, 2006) and Thierry de Duve, "Art in the Face of Radical Evil," *October* (125, summer, 2008), pp. 3–23

3 Sandra S. Phillips (ed.), *Exposed. Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010)

4 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004).

5 Ibid. p. 81.

6 Milagros de la Torre interview with the author, May 17, 2011

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Edward J. Sullivan, *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 237.

10 Milagros de la Torre interview with the author, May 17, 2011