

Marta Gili “Catching Silence in the Act” in *Milagros de la Torre: Photographs 1991 – 2011*, edited by Alexis Fabry (Paris: Toluca, Mexico: RM, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Larivière, 2012)

The work of Milagros de la Torre starts from a close and detailed observation of the stillness of objects and archives. To achieve her purpose, the artist makes use of photography as a tool that fixes and detains, even as it fragments and constructs an alternative account of reality.

Every object, every collection of objects, is enveloped in the time, gesture, and meaning of the human activity that has conceived it or been associated with it. Milagros de la Torre is not so much interested in the formal qualities of objects as in their faculty of revealing certain social, political, and economic aspects of their use.

Creating mainly series of photographs in which the objects are associated by their function, their form, or the trace they leave, the photographer employs this strategy of inscription as the starting point for the formulation of a new meaning. In effect, in consonance with other contemporary artistic practices whereby the assemblage, serialization, or reconstruction of images confers a new meaning on the objects and spaces represented, Milagros de la Torre takes possession of what is real with a view to modifying, or simply highlighting, the position of things, language, and discourse.

Thus, the artist registers the apparent silence of things in order to offer a poetic account in which displacements and metaphors coexist with evidence and proofs. In this sense, the artist conceives her photographic practice as a strategy to bypass the perceptive processes that organize beforehand the world that surrounds us, making it possible to formulate an alternative account.

Take, for example, one of her most emblematic works, *Lost and Found* (1996), in which she establishes a double critical link between evidence and representation. In order to do so, the artist gained access to the Evidence Archive located on the rooftop of the Lima Courthouse. Accompanied by the person who has looked after the archive for more than thirty years, she reviewed the objects –case by case, with the help of archivist’s testimony– that had served to send defendants to death row. A total of fifteen objects were photographed against a black background, surrounded by a halo of light that recalls nineteenth-century photography: a setting for the symbolic return of the present of stories from the past.

The images of *Lost and Found* are not about stories that have been told and concluded. They provide rather a critical exercise on the basis of objects that once served as legal evidence but are now inserted into a poetics of evocation and a threefold subjective reconstitution of the original account: that of the story recalled by the archivist, that of the objects represented by the artist, and that of the viewer’s own perception. In effect, the composition of the images and the narrative text that accompanies *Lost and Found* seek to situate viewers at the very center of the account, requiring them to explore the context of the images from their own narrative experience. Appropriating the rigorous presence of legal evidence and deconstructing the implacably realist effect of photography, De la Torre leads the contemporary spectator to ask questions rather than render verdicts in the presence of these alleged proofs of past guilt. As in most of her work, in *Lost and Found* Milagros de la Torre not only questions the fragile link between evidence and condemnation, but also explores notions such as representation, perception, and critical judgment in the context of photography and its social and political uses.

With their archival exploration of discrimination, exclusion, fanaticism, and abuse of power, projects such as *Folded Pages* (1996), *Left Blank* (1998), *Censored* (1998 and 2000), *The Disappeared* (1998), and *FF* (2007-2008) place the phantasms of silence on display with varying degrees of intensity. The stillness of the archive and the objects deposited in it express horror and despair, even as they confer again on the present the same eternal disquiets.

The construction of meaning through certain contemporary photographic strategies such as fragmentation, decontextualization, isolation, concatenation, and repetition is also a part of Milagros de la Torre's universe. In *The Disappeared* (1998), *Armored* (2000), *Vests* (2007), *Bulletproof* (2008), and more recently *Helmets* (2009), the evidence of objects and their persistent presence again evoke the degeneration of human relations but also the fragility of the body subjected to and impugned by the violence of others. Along the same lines there is *Bleus* (2002), a work in which, for the first time, the artist's own skin is transformed into a battlefield, a body of evidence in the strict sense of the term. Far removed from the police precinct photographs that make up a great deal of her work, in *Bleus* the artist constructs images in which certainty gives way to evocation. Here the object is her own body, the archive is her own skin: a first-person account. In this case, the translation of injury into daring, of shame into denunciation, does not pass by way of a detailed description of the harm done but through the evocation of an undefined, intangible despair that appropriates the depths of the artist herself, beyond her own skin. Blurred images, indescribable landscapes of a skin transformed into a devastated territory.

Rhetoric about signs and traces of objects and places has always permeated the theoretical discourse of photography. Milagros de la Torre shows us how, beyond this obvious affirmation, beyond the representation of stories in fixed, closed compartments, photography is capable of opening other cracks, through which other alternative stories can be glimpsed. In this way, photography, to borrow the phrase of the Spanish writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna, "catches silence in the act."