

Exhibition Review

Doris Salcedo

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, February 21–May 24, 2015;
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 26–October 12, 2015
Pérez Art Museum Miami, Summer 2016

Columbian artist Doris Salcedo has long been commended for her treatment of difficult subject matter: loss, mourning and more recently her observation that Columbian culture has become inured to grief. Her most striking works are site-specific installations. *Shibboleth* (2007), a crack in the concrete floor of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall leaves a scar to this day; *Abyss* (2005), the extension of a seemingly unsupported brick ceiling in Turin's Castello di Rivoli; and *Untitled* (2003) presented 1550 wooden chairs in an empty building site at the 8th International Istanbul Biennial. A large part of the power these works command is their sophisticated relationships to the sites they occupy.

This makes the reality of Salcedo's first retrospective exhibition odd. Beyond the question of place is the difficulty of taking in a volume of Salcedo's troubling, contemplative works in a single

visit. For example, I first saw *Plegaria Muda* (2008–2010), upturned wooden tables sprouting fine green blades of grass in the White Cube's Manson Yard gallery in 2012. In London, viewers descended to the lower ground floor to see the work. Threading through the maze of coffin-sized tables and inevitable dead ends prompted introspection.

In Chicago *Plegaria Muda* (Figure 1) was Salcedo's first work to greet visitors taking the lift or stairs. Rather than invite contemplation, the installation battled against distracting lighting fixtures and unsympathetic architecture. Grass that looked so tenacious and impossible when growing in London, drooped in Chicago. Admittedly I visited in the final days of the exhibition, but rather than leave with the powerful impression of one complex work in mind, as I did when visiting the 2012 installation, I found myself both distracted by my navigation to the next room and tempted by what it might hold.

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Textile, Volume 14, Issue 1, pp. 136–141

DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2015.1102508

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Printed in the United Kingdom



Figure 1

Plegaria Muda (detail), 2008–2010. Installation view, *Doris Salcedo*, MCA Chicago. Inhotim Collection, Brazil. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

Needless to say, the next rooms held familiar but each remarkable works. The exquisitely executed *Atrabiliarios* (1992–2004; Figure 2) uses women's shoes, pairs and halves of pairs, trapped behind semi-transparent windows of

animal skin literally sutured to the gallery's white drywall. Nearby, *Unland's* (1995–98; Figure 3) three related works each brought together two different ends of wooden tables using human hair and raw silk stitched through thousands

of holes drilled into the wood. Another fragile, impossible repair.

Salcedo's newest work in the show is *Disremembered I* (2014; Figure 4). The three shirt-shaped sculptures made of woven silk thread and approximately 12,000

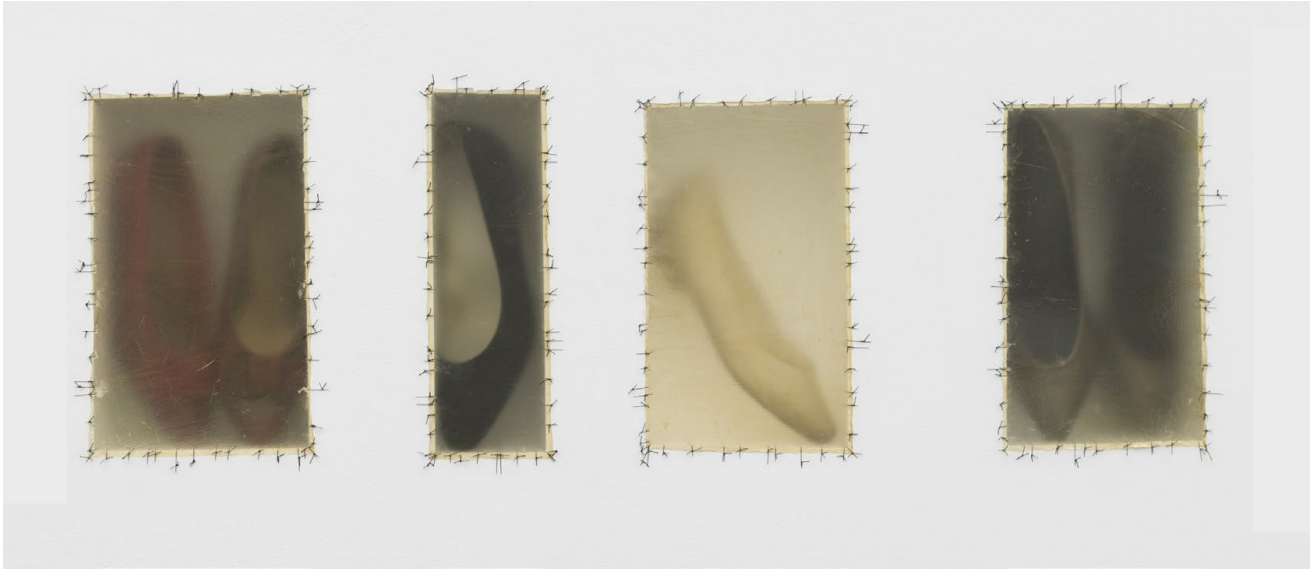


Figure 2

Atrabiliarios (detail), 1992–2004. Installation view, *Doris Salcedo*, MCA Chicago. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase: gift of Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein, Patricia and Raoul Kennedy, Elaine McKeon, Lisa and John Miller, Chara Schreyer and Gordon Freund, and Robin Wright. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.



Figure 3

Unland: the orphan's tunic (detail), 1997. "la Caixa" Contemporary Art Collection. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

sewing needles struggle to hold their own against so many familiar works. In a different exhibition context I suspect the impact of these

modest works would be entirely different.

I found a retrospective of Salcedo's work too much to absorb. Any one of the works on

display provides overwhelming food for thought. When experienced en masse, a dangerous overload starts to creep into the experience—perhaps even a ver-



Figure 4

Disremembered I, 2014. Collection of Diane and Bruce Halle. Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York. Reproduced courtesy of the artist; Alexander and Bonin, New York; and White Cube.

sion of the very same overload the accompanying exhibition pamphlet explains as what “Salcedo perceives to be society’s

inability to mourn.” This makes for an ironic outcome of a retrospective intended to acknowledge the career of a remarkable

artist. Salcedo’s career to date is no less remarkable, but perhaps best separated by time and space.