

UNLAND DORIS SALCEDO



new work

INTRODUCTION

DORIS SALCEDO is a sculptor living and working in Bogotá, Colombia. In the past decade she has increasingly gained international attention with work included in the Sydney Biennial in 1992 and the Venice Biennale in 1993. While her sculptures were presented in San Francisco in 1993 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the exhibition *Ante America* and in a group exhibition in 1994 at the John Berggruen Gallery, it was only in 1995 that she achieved widespread notice in the United States with her inclusion in the *Carnegie International* in Pittsburgh and in group exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art.

With this exhibition Salcedo introduces to the public three new works made over the past three years, a series she has titled *Unland*. This word exists in neither Spanish nor English but was inspired by the poetry of Paul Celan and connotes various possible meanings, suggesting perhaps a land one has come from or perhaps a land that has been taken away. Salcedo has been deeply affected by the prevalence of violence in contemporary Colombia, a society in which the reality of sudden disappearance and death permeates everyday life, in which ordinary people are lost and forgotten in the battles of the civil and drug wars. She has interviewed many survivors of the violence, acting as a "secondary witness," absorbing their pain and memories. These sculptures are memorials to their loss.

Yet even without knowing their origin, these works are deeply emotional in their impact, tender and precious, yet haunting and powerful. Their elegance and formal rigor deepen them as works of art beyond sensationalism or sentimentality. Salcedo has bored hundreds of tiny holes through the wooden fibers of these

tables and then woven them with human hair, sometimes over a thin layer of silk. Traditionally the table is a gathering place, where we are nurtured and sustained. Here the tables have taken on a fragile membrane or skin, protection like a scar, a rotten growth that may have appeared in the darkness, flesh that has yet to be scraped down to the bone. As Salcedo notes in the following interview, the situation of society in contemporary Colombia is not new to the human condition, but only exposed in the present. We do not need to know the particular stories to grasp the vulnerabilities transferred to us by these works.

For their support of this exhibition, thanks are due to Dan Cameron of the New Museum of Contemporary Art and to Louis Grachos of SITE Santa Fe, whose institutions were the first to present these works to the public. Carolyn Alexander and Ted Bonin of Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York, have been crucial in bringing Salcedo's work to larger attention. In San Francisco, the support of Collectors Forum of SFMOMA and the San Francisco International Exposition Residency (a collaborative project of SFMOMA and the San Francisco Art Institute) makes this exhibition possible. We deeply appreciate the work of Charles Merewether, who undertook a new interview with the artist for this exhibition. I would like to thank the Accessions Committee of SFMOMA, which has enabled the Museum to acquire one of these works, *Unland: irreversible witness*, now part of the permanent collection. Finally, I extend my deepest thanks to Doris Salcedo for offering us her confidence to take into our care these sculptures over which so much of her own life has been given.

Gary Garrels

Elise S. Haas Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture

AN INTERVIEW WITH DORIS SALCEDO

BY CHARLES MEREWETHER

CHARLES MEREWETHER: Concerning your work *Unland*, you have spoken of how each table draws upon a specific story or incidents happening in Colombia. How do you conceive your work in relation to these stories? Can you say something about the importance of art for you, that is, what you believe art is able to bring to the subject and to the viewer that is of special value?

DORIS SALCEDO: Anyone who has been witness to the violent death of someone else, especially of a loved one, has lived an experience similar to that of a tragic hero, such as Gilgamesh. Life's trajectory for the victims of the violence in Colombia is already defined by this kind of encounter with death, the same as for Gilgamesh. Their lives acquire death as their only content. The confrontation with death, and especially with the death of a loved one, provokes what Aristotle called both terror and compassion.

I do not illustrate testimonies. Rather, in the testimonies that I work with, I look for this simultaneous appearance of terror and compassion. It is in the context of tragedy where this takes place. Each victim's experience is the foundation of the work, because that's where I encounter something absolutely identical in each person. This sameness is the only thing that can be the content of a work of art. Tragedy makes this purely human aspect manifest itself: for me, art and tragedy are intimately linked. This relationship has been analyzed brilliantly by many authors, including Aristotle, René Girard, Franz Rosenzweig, and Elias Canetti, whom I've studied and always quote directly because I feel strongly that I cannot repeat as eloquently and as precisely what they have already said and expressed.

CM: How do you make choices from peoples' testimonials, choices which are then given an aesthetic form and represent those testimonies or experiences?

DS: The civil war in Colombia defines a reality that imposes itself on my work at every level of its production. The precariousness of the materials that I use is already given in the testimonies of the victims. As a result, as an artist, I don't have the opportunity to choose the themes that inform a piece. The oft-celebrated freedom of the artist is a myth.

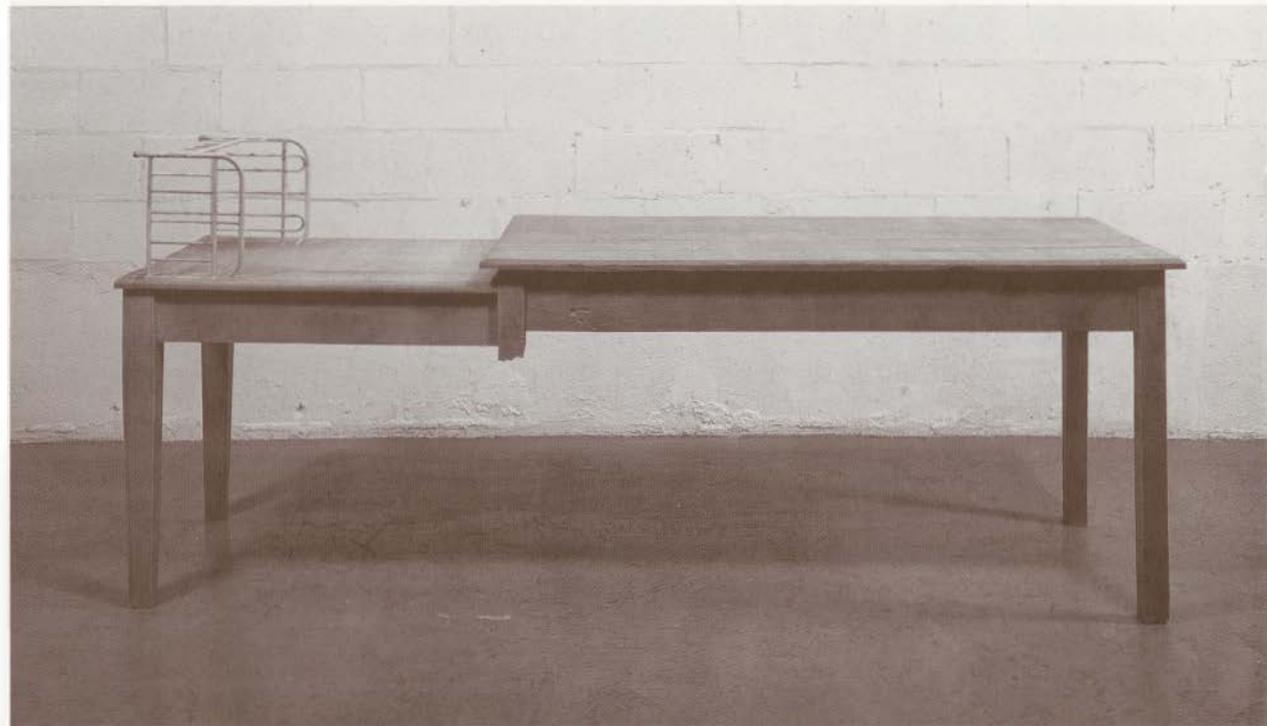


*Unland
audible in the mouth, 1998*

The Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has helped us understand that the other precedes me and claims my presence before I exist. In that sense, there is a delay that can never be made up. "My presence does not respond to the extreme urgency of its assignment. It only accuses me of having been late," writes Levinas. I work with this delay that cannot be made up. As a result, everything precedes me, everything makes its presence felt with such urgency that I am not the one who chooses; my themes are given to me, reality is given to me, the presence of each victim imposes itself.

CM: In the installation of *Unland* the placement of each table and the lighting seem very important to creating the conditions for its viewing and for our understanding. For me, it creates an aura of silence in which to view the three tables as single, almost isolated pieces and, at the same time, as sharing something in common. Can you say something about this in view both of your experience of listening to these stories, their remembrance, and of the presentation of *Unland*?

DS: Just as it happens to heroes, for the victims of violence, the world becomes strange to them, and they enclose themselves in complete—mute—silence. Franz Rosenzweig writes in *The Star of Redemption* that the only language for a tragic hero is silence. In art, silence is already a language—a language prior to language—of the unexpressed and the inexpressible: "Art is the transmission



Unland
irreversible witness, 1995–98

without words of what is the same in all human beings. . . . The tragic hero's silence is silent in all art and is understood in all art without a single word." Rosenzweig says that art does not create a community. In art, all remains silent. The silence of the victim of the violence in Colombia, my silence as an artist, and the silence of the viewer come together during the precise moment of contemplation and only in the very space where that contemplation occurs.

CM: May we not link this silence also to the duration and proximity in the viewing of the work, insofar that it is only upon closer viewing, with proximity, that the tables begin to reveal themselves? Perceiving the work then is guided by silence and duration in order to work like a slow-release chemical inside the body. Is this a metaphor for our relation to the subject, to people and their lives, to the way trauma occurs after the fact, as if it is being experienced for the first time?

DS: The silent contemplation of each viewer permits the life seen in the work to reappear. Change takes place, as if the experience of the victim were reaching out, beyond, as if making a bridge over the space between one person and another. To make this connection possible is the important thing. "Duration is essentially memory, conscience, and liberty. It is conscience and liberty because it is, primordially, memory," wrote [French philosopher] Gilles Deleuze.

The experience is intimate and can only be made visible in the space, the space permits that the experience endures. The sculpture presents the experience of the victim as something present—a reality that resounds within the silence of each human being that gazes upon it.

It is because of this that the work of art preserves life, offering the possibility that an intimacy develops in a human being when he or she receives something of the experience of another. Art sustains the possibility of an encounter between people who come from quite distinct realities.

CM: How might you speak of an ethics of remembering when there is, at times, a need to forget as much as there is an absence of memory or amnesia? What role does memory play in your work, both in terms of your method of working and for the audience?

DS: Over the past few years the question of memory has been abused and exhausted as a theme. Given that mourning is a permanent presence my work, the notion of memory is also ambiguous, since it is always confronted with a doubt, with an aporia. One struggles between the necessity of being faithful to the memory of the other, to keep that loved one alive within us, and with the necessity of overcoming that impossible mourning with forgetting.

My work deals with the fact that the beloved—the object of violence—always leaves his or her trace imprinted on us. Simultaneously, the art works to continue the life of the bereaved, a life disfigured by the other's death. [French philosopher] Jacques Derrida says, "everything that we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of the memories from beyond the grave."

My work speaks of the continuation of life, a life disfigured, as Derrida would say. Memory must work between the figure of the one who has died and the life disfigured by the death. As a result, I would say that the only way in which I confront memory in my work is to begin with the failure of memory.

CM: I should like to ask you about what I perceive as changes in your work over the past ten years. Your work in the late 1980s seemed to more overtly represent violence, and then with *Atrabiliarios* (Defiant) and *La Casa Viuda* (The Widowed House), to move toward ways of addressing the experience of absence, loss, and mourning. Do you see your work as an articulation of that loss? Is it about bearing witness and overcoming that loss, of trying to come to terms with the experience of trauma and bereavement? How would you describe your current work? Is it also about survival, of living on?

DS: I take on with full responsibility the theme of violence and war. I don't think that in my work this theme develops in an evolutionary way; I simply touch upon different aspects of war. Perhaps one day I will return to more explicit images. As I've stated, I don't choose my themes, I accept what happens.

My works are for the victims of violence. I try to be a witness of the witness. I look for an intimate proximity with the victims of violence that allows me to stand in for them. One must feel close to another in order to stand in for him or her and create an artwork out of another's experience. As a result, the work is made using his or her testimony as its foundation. It is not my rational intent but rather the experience of the victim that tells us about trauma, pain, loss. As a sculptor, I am aware of every detail that informs the life of the victim: the corporeality, the feelings, the vulnerability, the failings, the space, his or her life's trajectory and language. I don't formulate the experience of the victim, rather, I assemble it so that it remains forever a presence in the present moment.

In my work, I do not try to elaborate or transform the grief or overcome the traumas of another being. I can only give form to works which, once completed, are autonomous creatures, independent of my intentions. Sculpture for me is the giving of a material gift to that being who makes his presence felt in my work.

CM: You have spoken of how you don't choose the themes, but accept what happens. Does the long process of making the work—a form of immersion—play a part in this displacement of yourself and recognition of the other?

DS: This process of approaching the other takes place all the way to the point that supplanting or metamorphosis does indeed occur. During the elaboration of an artwork, these victims live within me and remain in me even after the work is finished.

But, also I would like to add that, the finished work of art is an autonomous creature, independent of my original intention; my work as an artist is not to illustrate these testimonies. Formal logic is not at all helpful in the formative process of making a work of art. On the contrary, it is harmful: it paralyzes intuition, blocks inspiration, and impedes the appropriation of the dissimilar.

CM: Do you see the role of the artist as mediating between a witness or victim of violence and an audience that has not necessarily had such an experience or knows very little, such as an audience from outside Colombia? Could we say that the work of art might play a part in enabling us to recognize difference and commonality, in order that we might understand both the specificity of the violence on the subject to whom you refer and an experience that may be common to us all?

DS: Living amidst war, my role is to think of war, both from the point of view of the victim and of the perpetrator. I am interested in war as a part of human history, as a central activity of all societies in the past as well as in the present. The enemies change, the forms of annihilation change, the weapons change, but the nature of war is the same. When I take the case of Colombia, I do so because that is the reality that I know best. I do not speak of the violence in Colombia from a nationalist perspective. I focus on the individual and not on the acts of violence that define the State. I am not interested in denouncing before an international audience what is happening in my country here and now. I am aware that art has a precarious capacity to denounce.

Moreover, violence is present in the whole world and in all of us. As a result, I am interested in questioning the elements of violence endemic to human nature. Cruelty, indolence, and hatred toward others are universal. I look for the possibility of making the connection between the one particular and harsh event that takes place in Colombia and the equally cruel and harsh everyday life that takes place elsewhere. Perhaps in other places it occurs in a more hidden and subtle way, yet one that is no less painful or unjust. As Levinas says, there are a thousand ways of spilling blood. For example, when we are sophisticated and cruel, one way to spill blood is to make the other person blush.

CM: What do you want those people who know little or nothing about the specific subject to take away with them, to remember?

DS: As an artist, I do not try to control the experience of the viewer. I simply reveal—*expose*—an image." I use this word *expose* (*exponer*) because it implies vulnerability. The image is not finished in my studio; I complete it in situ, in the very space where the viewer will encounter it. What I propose is that everything that takes place in that space, once I have finished the work, occurs within the viewer's own space. Each person will—or will not—approach an artwork according to his or her spirit. What the viewers might come to feel, to remember, or to comprehend, is entirely dependent on their internal code.



Unland
irreversible witness, 1995–98 (detail)

CM: Can you say more about this in relation to the notion of community? And, do you see your work as a way of trying to create different forms of community based on absence, loss, shared values, and responsibility to each other?

DS: The notion of community is born when the individual opens him or herself to others. To accompany someone to his or her death, step by step, opens us to the other, and leads us to forget our own existence, it unites us to that other, who will then remain inscribed inside us.

The exhaustive investigation that I carry out on the deaths of the victims of violence, on the actual deed of the murder, leads me to accompany them, step by step, to that death, and in that sense I feel as though they are inscribed in me. Therefore, I assume responsibility toward the bereaved. Without responsibility an idea of community is also impossible. That is why I try to keep in mind the famous line from [Fyodor Dostoyevsky's] *The Brothers Karamazov* that is also so close to what Levinas writes and which seems to me a good model to emulate, a proposition that we should all make our own: "We are all responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others."

Translated from Spanish by Charles Merewether and Sylvia Korwek.
Charles Merewether is an art historian and curator at the Getty Research Institute.

DORIS SALCEDO was born in 1958 in Bogotá, Colombia, where she presently lives and works. She received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Universidad de Bogotá in 1980 and a master's degree in sculpture from New York University in 1984. In 1995 she was the recipient of a Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Grant. She represented Colombia in the *XXIV Bienal de São Paulo*, 1998. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; the Art Institute of Chicago; and in the *Carnegie International 1995* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. One-person exhibitions have been presented at Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo, Brazil, and at White Cube, London, and her work has been shown at Alexander and Bonin, New York. Most recently, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and SITE Santa Fe presented the solo exhibition *Unland/Doris Salcedo*. For further reference, the catalogue produced for that exhibition includes a comprehensive exhibition history and bibliography of the artist.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unland

irreversible witness, 1995–98

wood, cloth, metal, and hair

44 x 98 x 35 in. (111.7 x 249 x 89 cm)

Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchased through the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Fund and the Accessions Committee Fund, 98.530

Unland

the orphan's tunic, 1997

wood, cloth, and hair

31½ x 96½ x 38½ in. (80 x 245 x 98 cm)

Collection of Contemporary Art Fundación "la Caixa," Barcelona

Unland

audible in the mouth, 1998

wood, thread, and hair

29¼ x 124 x 31½ in. (74.5 x 315 x 80 cm)

Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Unland/Doris Salcedo: New Work is part of the Museum's New Work series, which features recent or commissioned work by both younger and established artists. The New Work series is made possible by Collectors Forum, an auxiliary of SFMOMA.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

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Cover image: *Unland*, 1995–98 (installed at SITE Santa Fe in 1998)

New Work A series of recent work by younger and established artists