

# frieze

## Juan Manuel Echavarría and The War We Have Not Seen

July 29, 2014

by Elizabeth Rush and Juan Manuel Echavarría



*El Testigo (The Witness)*, 2011

Since Juan Manuel Echavarría's birth in 1947, Colombia has not known a single year of peace. The largest and most consistent conflict in the western hemisphere, the Colombian civil war has cost hundreds of thousands of civilians their lives, and has displaced millions of others. Peace talks began in 2012, but the progress is slow and requires so much more than a signature. Colombians are wondering, how, if at all, can their society heal from a half-a-century-long, grotesquely violent civil war?

Echavarría is a novelist-turned-artist who has been asking himself this question for much of the past two decades, resulting in a fragile and understated oeuvre that attempts to distill some wisdom from the violence that has shaped Colombian experience for the last half a century. In Echavarría's care, Colombia's violence takes on an ephemeral and quotidian form. He turns the grotesque into the everyday, massacres into child's play. Always he errs on the less sensational side of war, choosing to depict instead the ways in which it turns everyone – perpetrators and civilians alike – into victims.

In 2007, Echavarría began a groundbreaking project to show the war from the perspective of those who inflicted its unprecedented violence. He started running workshops in Bogota,

teaching ex-paramilitaries and guerrilla deserters to paint. The results are terrifying and beautiful mostly for the naivety with which they were executed. Imagine scenes from a brutal rape, from the demolition of a village, from a mass execution seemingly painted by a child. Almost all of the soldier-artists learned to hold a gun before a pencil, went to war instead of to school and their lack of education shows in the naïve style of their paintings. All of the images in the book are drawn from experience, each depicting a different personal account of the war. In one image, three cartoon-like figures are publicly executed while civilians workout and soldiers train. You get the feeling that each of the figures wears a smile because the painter did not have the skill to depict anything else. In another, five disembodied heads float alongside various roughly sketched arms and legs in an amoeba-like puddle of blood. Black stick figures surround his heap of childishly transfigured carnage. The three round humps of a primitively drawn mountain chain loom above, imbuing the scene with an elemental and enduring quality.



From the series *'The war we have not seen: a historical memory project'*, 2007

Echavarría's most recent body of work, 'Silencios' (2012–13), is a suite of 12 photographs each taken in a different abandoned schoolhouse in Montes de Maria, a beautiful mountainous area in rural Colombia. Fearing violence, the majority of those who lived in Montes de Maria abandoned their homes in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Each of the images in 'Silencios' chooses the empty blackboard as its subject. Some also feature an animal – a pig, a termite den, a cock – who have taken up residence in the disintegrating schoolhouses. In other cases the viewer can see traces of a human presence. The images illustrate the re-appropriation of civic space by animals and individuals desperate to survive in a political climate that has put an end to education. At once gorgeous, engrossing, and painful to look at, 'Silencios' chronicles the timid signs of life that are beginning to accumulate at the periphery of rural Colombian society as the violence wanes.

**ER** Give me the context for your work. How did Colombia's war shape the environment that shaped you?

**JME** Look, in the Colombian Republic in the 19th century there were nine civil wars. In the 20th century we have had 60 continuous years of civil war and in the 21st we have had 14 years of

war. We never seem to be able to interrupt those cycles of violence. They just keep going on and on. I grew up in Medellin, which was to become a violent city with the narco-trafficking, but in my youth, it was extremely peaceful even though rural Colombia was at war.

**ER** Your first ideas of violence must have come not from the imaginary realm of movies or novels, but from somewhere closer and more real. What was that like?

**JME** I never saw the war on television, but I did hear about it on the radio, so the violence I knew wasn't visual it was oral. I couldn't forget the stories that I heard. When we are young we sometimes trap things in the net of our unconscious. There is a word planchar, which is to iron. I remember that I would hear things like: 'The conservatives have gone into liberal town and they have planchar-ed the liberals.' I used to go into the laundry room where the help was ironing the pants and somehow that association stayed in my mind. I remember thinking: 'My god, it must hurt! Planchar another human being must hurt because I can see that it burns.' Somehow, in childhood, those pants – my father's pants – were being ironed and I would say, 'Well, that's a human being'.



*Corte de Florero: Maxillaria Vorax, 1997*

**ER** One of your earlier photographic series, 'Corte de Florero' (Flower Cut Vases, 1997). Did it originate from that childhood net of memories?

**JME** Absolutely. In the 1950s the perpetrators would do transgressions to their victims' bodies, which were called cortes or cuts. I was seven or eight and I would hear about them on the radio. A very famous one was called the Corte de Corbata, or the necktie cut, in which the perpetrator would slice open the throat of his victim and bring out the tongue. So that image is there in my head, trapped always. I was able to transform those cortes into my 'Flower Cut Vase' series, which are images of flowers made with human bones. Each piece takes its name from one of those famous cortes, and tries to mimic what they might have looked like in form. Of course,



back then everything else in my life was so peaceful. I would go pick tangerines from the trees. Life was normal but somehow there was this vivid, violent invasion of that normality.

**ER** Your work refuses to participate in violence in its own terms, but rather draws that violence into a mundane realm – the realm of flowers for instance. This seems closer to the way violence is experienced when it happens everyday in your country, at close range, for half a century. Is this a conscious choice?

**JME** When you are dealing with something so delicate, so sensitive, so visceral, as violence in art you have to ask, how do I represent it? I have chosen the indirect look, la mirada indirecta. Goya, in his 'Disasters of War' series (1810-20), always has a title underneath. In one work he is showing a massacre and below it he says no se puede mirar (you cannot look at it). I think what he is saying is through the transformation that art permits, you can look and feel and think about the horror of war.

**ER** The War We Have Not Seen, a more recent project, is a collection of paintings made by soldiers who have defected. It illustrates the naturalization of violence from the perspective of those who inflicted it. How did this project come about?

**JME** The stories of the perpetrators of Colombian violence are completely absent from our society. I mean, how can we expect to make sense of the war without their stories. When I began working with these people in a two-year-long series of painting workshops, they would say to me: 'Who wants to listen to my story? I am a perpetrator.' But those perpetrators, as I would learn, are also victims. They often enter war for one of two reasons: because of vengeance or because of a lack of education. In the absence of education they held a rifle before a pencil. War did that to them. And that is why they paint in such a simple manner, because they barely know how to hold a writing instrument. In their hands, horror scenes appear as naïve stories.

**ER** That naivety is precisely what is so overwhelming about the work. We see a painting of a town by a river, where each of the buildings is represented in a flat two-dimensional manner. On the bridge over the river are four bloody circles with two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth. Blood pours from where the neck would be. Down in the flat blue river below four headless bodies float. All around this scene are uniformly painted homes one after another, illustrating complete uniform normality. It's haunting, really. The scene is so violent and yet the painting appears as though a child made it.

**JME** Correct. The naivety of these paintings is the result of a lack of schooling. Some of the painters were displaced from their villages as we see in the other series of photographs, 'Silencios'. I will say this again because it is very important. The brush allowed them to talk about their experiences, things that many of them had never shared with anyone. It distanced them from their own experience with the horror of war. Art speaks in the spaces that our culture silences.

*Silencio con Grieta, 2010*

**ER** 'Silencios' explores the same theme from a completely different angle, from the ruination and slow rebirth of a rural region in Colombia, Montes de Maria.

**JME** Montes de Maria is a huge area in Colombia that is remote and has little infrastructure. This area is completely ravaged by war. And when I say ravaged by war I mean a whole population of peasants there were forced to leave their homes and their land. Sometimes I would spend hours and hours walking in the hot sun on a path to get to a village and see no one. I went mostly alone and over three years built very important relationships with people there that I learned to trust. And they learnt to trust me, learnt to trust that I am an artist not a government agent. These people are fantastic guides because some of them are ex-guerillas who fought in Montes de Maria. And some are ex-military soldiers who fought in Montes de Maria. They stop me sometimes and say: 'Look at the top of that mountain, there was the camp of the guerilla.' This project is really about touching the geography of war, touching the people who have fought in the war, the people who are victims of the war, and connecting them. Often at the end of a day we all sit down together and eat and drink beer and I hear their stories.

**ER** They are okay talking with one another, these ex-guerillas and ex-paramilitaries?

**JME** Absolutely, they even have the other's mobile phone numbers.

**ER** Are you surprised by that? Is that amnesia or something beautiful, human, in the spirit of survival?

**JME** I think it means understanding that they are not enemies anymore and that someone else made them into enemies. One of the ex-guerrillas, Miguel, enters the guerilla when he is 15. Tell me if at that moment he is not a victim of the war?

**ER** I agree he is both a victim of the war and of circumstance. How did he get there?

**JME** He gets there because the guerillas would come near his house. He lived far out in the mountains where there was no Colombian Army. The guerillas would come and say to the mother, 'Give us a hen'. They were hungry. They would then say, 'Give us water'. And that is how they begin. Finally they say to the mother, 'You know your son could be in our army'. Both the guerillas and paramilitaries take young children into war. I will tell you a story I heard from Miguel. The guerillas were doing an internal investigation. But in the guerillas as in the paramilitary an internal investigation usually ends in execution, as it was in this case.

**ER** Not surprising.

**JME** The young soldier who was going to be executed had a brother in the same company. And Martin Caballero, the guerilla leader in this particular area, has the brother execute his own brother. He is forced to do it. A few weeks later the brother who killed his own brother runs away from the guerillas and he enters the opposite force of the far right paramilitaries. These two brothers came from a village called El Salado, where the civil population was stigmatized as being collaborators of the guerillas. A few months later, the far right performs a huge massacre in El Salado that lasts for three days. They kill the civilians in the football field so that everyone can be a spectator of the horror. And it is the brother who had to kill his brother who goes to the massacre of El Salado and tells the paramilitary: 'She was the girlfriend of a guerilla soldier.' So they murder her. 'She would sell water to the guerillas.' They kill her. He came from the village and he was the informer of the village. It was one of the most horrific massacres done in all of Colombia. Anthropologists have studied it, people study it and here we have this story of one man that tells us exactly how war works.



*Silencio Azul, 2010*

**ER** I have never lived through anything like that, so I am a little surprised that killing one's own brother turns this man even more into the act of killing and into the act of turning against one's people. I thought he left the guerillas to escape that, but he becomes ...

**JME** Immersed in vengeance. Immersed in vengeance because that is what the cycles of war have done in Colombia.

**ER** And then when does it stop?

**JME** Correct, correct, correct ... correct, correct, correct ... correct, correct (his voice fades). Is the story clear?

**ER** Yes, yes.

**JME** Thank you, because it is an important story. In that horrific story there is a web and the Colombian war is like that. Everything is tied together.

**ER** So why photograph schoolhouses? How do they fit into this web of the Colombian war that you are documenting?

**JME** There is a lot of silence in Colombia about certain aspects of the war. And when you enter these abandoned schools you feel that silence in the absence of the voice of the children. In any school anywhere in the world when we learn how to say the alphabet, we say aaaaaah, beeeeeee, ceeeeeeee...



*Silencio Dorado, 2010*

**ER** Yes and we learn to sing alphabet songs.

**JME** Correct, so when I see these empty blackboards and the vowels written on the wall above them I feel that these schools were enveloped by silence, embalmed by silence. I feel that these schools are saying: 'How long I have been waiting for you to photograph me, so you can speak about my silence?'**ER** What does it feel like to be in one?

**JME** In many of the schools there is nothing but abandonment. Emptiness. But the most disturbing ones are those that have become pigsties or corrals for other animals.

**ER** There is a fantastic video of a donkey standing in front of a blackboard in one of these abandoned schoolhouses. The donkey's tail is brushing away flies, its skin twitches, and the hoof stomps. It is only two minutes long but it is also so powerful, especially the noise of the donkey's hoof hitting the ground in an otherwise silent exhibition. Why break the silence of the exhibition with that sound?

**JME** I didn't put the donkey in the school. He was there. I placed myself in front of the blackboard to take the photograph and he placed himself in front of the blackboard. I did the video, because I was so impressed that there was a living thing, of its own volition, in this abandoned school!

**ER** And this was rare in the schoolhouses?

**JME** Correct. I asked Gabrielle, the person who took me to this school, why is the donkey here? The school hadn't been turned into a corral – there was no food, no gate barring the donkey's exit. He said: 'That donkey is here because he once brought a child to the school everyday and he picked up the child at the end of each day. He has come back for that child but the child is no longer here. He waits everyday for that child who never comes.'

**ER** Does the piece have name?

**JME** Una lección. A Lesson.



*Testigo Limón, 2010*

**ER** Colombia has the highest number of internally displaced people in the world. Close to 10% of the population. To be internally displaced, what a ghoulish term, it sounds like being lost

within oneself. What lessons did you learn about how to make sense of the loss of a self and home place from shooting Silencios?

**JME** In these photos there is a double displacement – first the displacement of the children and of the population who used these schools, and then the displacement of those who have come into the schools now that the violence has subsided to make the classroom into their homes. I prefer the term forcefully displaced instead of internally displaced because internal displacement is almost a euphemism, a way of softening the tragedy. Forceful displacement is truer to the act.

**ER** I see, the term forceful displacement carries coercion with it. When we hear this term we know that leaving the home has ceased to be a personal choice.

**JME** Exactly. One displaced woman said to me a sentence, an oral metaphor, ‘Nosotros nos llevamos el tronco, pero dejamos las raíces allá.’ Translated it means, ‘we brought our trunks but the roots stayed there’. That is an image of physical, of spiritual and psychological mutilation. And I think it is the most perfect metaphor that I have heard about forceful displacement.

**ER** I see in your images the small dignity of those who have been forcefully displaced through the everyday objects that adorn the classrooms they have appropriated – a calendar, a hair comb, a neatly folded pair of trousers. When you could focus only on horror you also bring this dignity in and with it comes a tiny bit of hope. I don’t know if hope is the right word.

**JME** I think the right word is dignity. Because when I go to these places and I see families living in what used to be classrooms and I see how much love and care there is in that new home.

**ER** The way the objects are arranged by the families seems very intentional, very careful.

**JME** Yes, and nothing is superfluous. They have just what is necessary – the toothbrush, the toothpaste, the toilet paper. We see humanity at its essence. Imagine being displaced four times, and you continue to have a dignified space to live with your family. There are some small miracles. And there is hope in that because despite the violence and every horror we have inflicted on each other, life returns to these spaces once again. Earlier you asked me about the sound of the donkey’s hoof, and why I chose to have it interrupt the silence in the exhibition. I forgot to answer that question but I would like to answer it now. When that donkey touches the ground with his hoof he is saying, ‘I am here. Look at me. I am present.’