

# Requiem for a Country

by Laurel Reuter

Peace is not sold any where in the world,  
Otherwise I would have bought it for my country.  
—Girl in Afghanistan, 'Lost Chances' UNICEF Report, 2001<sup>1</sup>

"I was drowning in words." With that, Juan Manuel Echavarría walked away from thirty years as a writer of serious fiction, thirty years burrowing into the writing of the Western world, the literature of Spanish and English and the ancient Greeks. Shortly after, Echavarría's vision of his own world radically shifted. This often told story is worth repeating; in a moment of remarkable clarity, the fledgling artist found his way. A simple encounter on the streets of Bogotá ignited a profound change in his life.

One day while driving through Bogotá, Echavarría noticed that sidewalk sellers were displaying their wares on old battered mannequins. Busy rifling through the clothing, shoppers paid no heed. For a brief moment, the mannequins took on a different life for Echavarría. They became the raped and pillaged citizens of Colombia, the rural peasants suffering massacre after massacre, kidnapped for ransom, displaced, turned into refugees by the tens of thousands, or killed, their mutilated bodies tossed into a river or a mass grave. The damaged lives of ordinary people wrought helpless, homeless, and violent by fifty years of civil war normally went unnoticed by privileged citizens of Bogotá, buffered by wealth and security systems. The shoppers, themselves among the dispossessed, found the mannequins quite normal. But Echavarría noticed. Decades spent in the world's great literature, coupled with the maturity that can emerge from a life well lived both in Colombia and abroad, had sensitized Echavarría's spirit. Cast aside stand-ins for the human body opened his eyes.

Out of that brief moment came *Retratos* (Portraits). As the artist says, "Somehow in taking these pictures, which became my first series, I understood the direction my art should take. I would explore violence through metaphor. This became my North Star. I knew immediately this was where my work had to go."<sup>2</sup> From literature came his entanglement with metaphor; from his determination to see his country across social classes came his subject. To order each body of work, he looked to the history of cultural life.

Whereas *Retratos* is based upon the formal portrait, albeit of trashed mannequins from the street, *Corte de Florero* (Flower Vase Cut) takes its form from botanical prints from the late eighteenth century Spanish expeditions into the New World. In the gallery setting, the black and white photographs appear as a row of elegant, botanical prints, one flower to a page, placed simply upon a shelf that suggests a ledge or fireplace mantel in a fine home. Gradually it dawns upon the viewer that the exquisite illustrations of flowers are made from human bones. Each print alludes to a different formalized body mutilation used to serve notice of the power of the killer even after death. Each page is titled at the bottom in old-fashioned script. The artist gave every flower its scientific name plus a second name that describes his personal response to the violence represented by the bone flowers. For example, *Maxillaria Vorax*. carries the scientific name in Latin for an orchid, *Maxillaria*, followed by *vorax*, Latin for voracious. Violence is voracious. Or, *Radix insatiabilis*. *Radix* is "root" in Latin; *insatiabilis* is insatiable in Latin. Violence is insatiable. Elsewhere in this publication, Colombian anthropologist and historian María Victoria Uribe discusses the history of the cuts. It was the artist, upon reading Uribe's 1990 book about those cuts, who chose to give the bones of massacred Colombians the format of gorgeous botanical specimens.

Echavarría uses beauty to seduce the viewer into his world. His definition of beauty, however, encompasses the knowledge that at the core of all beauty lies awkwardness, ugliness even. The deformity that underpins Echavarría's art is the violence that inhabits the heart of Colombia. In *Portraits* the artist explores the mundaneness of this violence. Integrated into daily life, the horrible passes unnoticed. In *Flower Vase Cut* the artist examines the macabre ritualization that can accompany Colombian murder. In mutilating the corpses of the dead, the murderer appears without guilt and, even worse, without terror. It becomes the responsibility of the viewer to pass through the mask of beauty that shrouds Echavarría's art into the truth buried in its core.

Another seemingly simple work followed: *Escuela Nueva* (New School). Echavarría had gone to visit a cousin who had a small house on the Pacific. Traveling by small boat, they ventured into an abandoned village. Paramilitaries had posted warnings still visible on a crumbling fence; the people of Chicocóra were suspected of collaborating with the guerrillas. The remote Colombian village of some twenty thatched-roof huts lay in harm's way. Like Afghanistan at the crossroads between the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and the Far East, or the Poland of Churchill's observation,

"If you pitch your tent on Fifth Avenue [in New York City] you will be run over by a bus," location predetermined the village's fate. The cocaine trail from the mountainous growing region to the Pacific drug boats cut through the village.

Echavarría wandered into a small hut bearing the sign "Escuela Nueva" (New School), itself a graveyard of lost dreams. Among the remains were coloring books cast aside in the haste to flee. He took them back to Bogotá where they sat in his mind: The half-finished pages are of real threats: a bear goes after a child, a cobra makes a girl scream, a lion menaces a boy. The artist ruminated, "Isn't it perverse irony that the threat of the paramilitaries did not allow the children to finish coloring the threats encompassed in their illustrations?"

If you visit the artist's home in Bogotá out of which he does his work, or his studio in New York where production is completed, and he decides to truly let you in, you will find an equal amount of work that he set aside, chose not to finish, deemed "wrong" in the end. Juan Manuel Echavarría has an exceptional capacity to edit himself. The pages of the school books first appeared as photographs in a light box. Rejected: too pretty. He placed them against a black background. Again tossed aside: too dramatic. Today the pages emerge out of white, glowing like illuminated manuscripts. In Escuela Nueva one understands that evil extends into the life of children, filling them with fear while robbing them of childhood, of rudimentary education, of hope. By placing little coloring books within the timeless form of an illuminated manuscript, Echavarría rivets the viewer's attention. The discarded books become the record of all children around the world, forsaken by societies, maimed, dead, without value, tossed aside. And the viewer weeps for the child—inside.

Although conversant with the history of art, this is an artist who didn't look at the art of his own time until 1995 when he began to spend month-long sojourns in New York, often in the company of artist friends. How did he manage this seemingly impossible metamorphosis? Where did he find the confidence, the learning, the technical skill, the nose for what art can be in a living world?

Of course he apprenticed, but in literature. Those who have read the books speak of the difficulty his writing poses: dense, impenetrable, tangled in words, sophisticated, other worldly. Whereas those who come upon his photographs and videos call up other words: pared away, clear, sophisticated, of this world.

In February 2005 Echavarría's videos *La Bandeja de Bolívar:1999* (Bolívar's Platter:1999), *Guerra y Pa* (War and Peace) , and *Bocas de Ceniza* (Mouths of Ash) were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the discussion that followed, a member of the audience referred to Echavarría's work as "minimalist." In order to grasp Echavarría's art, that viewer, like audiences everywhere, seem to need to place Echavarría within the context of the contemporary art world and its movements. Instead, each Echavarría series needs to be placed within the context of the whole of his work—and the history of Colombia.

I believe that Juan Manuel Echavarría is creating a visual requiem to his own country. That is his work. His mournful lament has many movements, opening with Portraits. Each addition, or series, expands the themes of the larger composition. And interestingly, just as the work can be understood as a requiem, each series takes its form from older, established art forms in music, theater, literature, the visual and popular arts. It is as though, in referencing ancient art forms to shape each movement, the artist conveys the timeless universality of the endless killing that defines his own country. His killing fields of Colombia are the killing fields of human existence.

Following the first three photo-based bodies of work, the artist turned to video, to *Bolívar's Platter:1999*, a small allegory only minutes long based upon ten photographs. The action is simple. An object of historical importance, a platter from Simon Bolívar's banquet setting, is smashed. Simon Bolívar is the George Washington of Colombia. The subject is the total destruction of the Republic of Colombia by cocaine. The one who smashes has no name, no singular identity. First, the viewer is startled by and then left with the reverberating sound of shattering porcelain. Against a black void, the plate is reduced to star dust. But instead of drifting off into the Milky Way as one might expect, the ceramic dust coalesces into a gleaming, glistening mound of cocaine, the last image on the screen. This is a work of art distilled to its very essence. At the end, the audience is inevitably silent. *Bolívar's Platter:1999* seems to be the artist's personal cry for his beloved country. Hanging in the air is the question: Can science alone save Colombia with the invention of an inexpensive cocaine replacement, kind to the human body and available worldwide for recreational drug users and the addicts they become?

*Guerra y Pa* (War and Peace) is a video version of a modern-day morality play in which two parrots personify opposing moral positions. One screams war; the other screams peace. The surreal white background suggests no place—or all places. The warring parrot male wins, dominating from the top of a

cross-like perch, suggesting that Christianity set the stage. In this work, Echavarría first introduces the question: What is the role of the Christian church in Colombia's ongoing violence?

La María, like Escuela Nueva, is based upon a specific event, a 1999 mass kidnapping from a Catholic church in Cali during Sunday service. The artist formed his rambling narrative by photographing the seemingly inconsequential objects seven women brought back from their long months in captivity: a collection of insects and a collection of popular trading cards from Colombian chocolate bars that portray specimens from nature including plants, animals, and insects. Other photographs included images carved into small river stones that Echavarría's camera transforms into icons, the women's communal washing bowl with its allusion to the ecclesiastical chalice, the red rag that served as their only towel but suggests the blood-soaked cloth of Christ, and a delicate rosary. Most importantly, Echavarría also collected their stories.

This work caused the artist to grapple with the function of narrative in visual art. Must words escort the images in order to transmit the essence of La María? Certainly choral passages are at home in requiems. When first exhibited in the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia in Cali, the artist's video interview with the women played against the backdrop of a mural of the altar. Still, visitors to the exhibition trailed the artist, seeking answers to their questions. What happened? What are these pictures about? In the North Dakota exhibition, the interview with the woman, as it appears in this publication, became wall text. As in Samuel Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the story demands to be told. Echavarría's beautiful pictures reveal their meanings only in the telling. And the story is important because it contains within it the seeds of salvation for Colombia.

La María tells the story of kidnapping for ransom. Only here does Echavarría introduce hope in the form of educated, middle-class women. The art teacher and the botanist hold onto the promise of life through activities of the mind and the spirit. They study nature, form its collections. They make art, and they bring their companions into their activities. They teach the young guerrilla guards about the natural world, about mathematics. Importantly, in La María Echavarría draws attention to the humanity of the enemy, of those who kidnap. They are children, twelve-, thirteen-, eighteenyears-old. How can they make moral choices when their language doesn't contain simple vocabulary essential to ethical thinking? One recalls the lyrics from *South Pacific* that echoes the larger cultural truth of all democratic societies: "You have to be taught to read and write, you have to be taught wrong from right, you have to be carefully taught." In the story of La María, Echavarría finds hope for his tormented country.

In *Mouths of Ash*, the artist again collects stories. This time they appear in the form of songs composed by individuals who have survived massacres, which, like bards of old, they sing in public. Here they sing directly into the artist's camera. Echavarría often speaks of his desire to give voice to the voiceless. In these two works he is present but only as the sympathetic listener behind the camera lens. Like the artist himself in Bolívar's *Platter*, these Afro-Colombians at the bottom of society compose songs of mourning. With great eloquence, each sings his or her own dirge of fear and despair. Rafael Mosquera pleads:

Listen Mister President . . . Caramba!  
How are you going to govern  
Because this way, the peasants, Oh man!  
Are going to be wiped out.

Listen Mister President . . . Caramba!  
Don't you feel pain  
With so many Refugees, Oh man!  
That are heard across the region.

How the peasant runs . . . Caramba!  
Looking for a way to escape  
So that in the battles, Oh man!  
They won't be killed.

And in this horrible storm, Oh man!  
That happened down on the lower Atrato,  
They were left without their parents, Oh man!  
Those poor children.

For more than five years now... Caramba!  
Of this desperation  
And all over the place, Oh man!  
You hear suffering and pain.

And all over the place, Oh man!  
You hear suffering and pain.

Interestingly, as in *La María*, the artist finds hope for the future of Colombia with the singers. The process of turning their horrible experiences into art, and then offering that art to the public, brings a validation to their act of survival. Bearing witness to their own experience strengthens them, their families, and their community. "If I live, I will tell. If I don't live, my art will tell." And in the telling good overcomes evil.

*NN (No Name)*, Echavarría's last completed work before this catalog went to press, speaks to the human destruction visited upon masses of missing people. Kidnapped. Mutilated with blunt instruments. Killed. Disposed of without consequence. Here despair wins out as Echavarría replicates the fragmented image of a monumental but crumbling wall fresco from an earlier time. There is no narrative, only images of the remains of a dismembered, decomposing, once lovely girl child. In describing the work, again based upon a mannequin, Echavarría says, "I photographed the body as if I was doing an emotional autopsy, looking closely at the different parts of the figure and its different wounds. It was a body that I immediately associated with the mass graves and the massacres which keep occurring in Colombia. Here was a corpse that presented cuts that could have been done by machetes and other cutting instruments. This child's body became a metaphor of mutilation." Life is in the past.

He made *NN (No Name)* while thinking about the *desaparecidos* or the disappeared of Latin America during the military dictatorships of the latter decades of the twentieth century, and, in particular, of Colombia's own disappeared during fifty years of civil war. *NN* was first shown in the North Dakota Museum of Art's 2005 exhibition, *The Disappeared*. Monumental, somber, it brought to the exhibition, in its suggestion of ancient crumbling frescos, the sense that killing such as this always was and always will be. Darkness in all its decaying beauty informs the work to its very core.

With great ease, this artist dips into cultural history, mining its conventions, reinventing its forms. Only someone such as he, one who has been deeply educated in Western culture, could use the accumulated beauty of civilizations to draw the viewer into the evil that has crept into the soul of Colombia. Yet, except for *Flower Vase Cut* where the botanical print is clearly the precedent, the viewer is aware only subliminally of the references to established art forms. For Echavarría's art is overwhelmingly of its own times.

Colombia has forsaken all of its people, the rich, the poor, the educated, the blind—or have they forsaken Colombia? Echavarría's photo of the emaciated white horse, *El Testigo (The Witness)*, who watches the viewer from a desolate, barren landscape, embodies all the questions. Throughout literature the white horse has come to represent supernatural power, goodness, spiritual blessing, the winner. In a cruel twist of metaphor, Echavarría's white horse becomes Colombia itself, starved and starving while bearing witness to its own death. In its whiteness it suggests to the viewer the promise and bounty that was Colombia.

If Echavarría's work can be compared to anything, it comes closest to the Shaker gift drawing, one of those small exquisite offerings from an examined life. My favorite, used by the American artist Michael Mercil in a 2003 exhibition at the North Dakota Museum of Art, reads: "Her reconciled mind shall be her dress and it will be beautiful."<sup>3</sup> Echavarría leaves one wondering, is reconciliation between the forces of good and evil possible for a place such as Colombia? When Juan Manuel Echavarría creates the final movement in his requiem, he may be forced to decide.

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<sup>1</sup> Also used by Christina Lamb as an epigraph to *The Sewing Circles of Herat* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher) 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Essay based upon interviews between the author and the artist in August 2004 and subsequent conversations and correspondence over the next year.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from the inscription on an 1851 Shaker gift drawing by Polly Jane Reed for Jane Blanchard. According to Michael Mercil, most of the Shaker drawings were made between 1837-1850 during a period of spiritual revivalism within the sect known as the Era of Manifestations. The Shakers also variously described the drawings as spirit drawings, or as sacred tokens, rewards, or presents.