

SOA CYCLE

(www.carlosmotta.com/soa.html)

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Distortion, Disruption & Dispersion: Reconfigured Retellings by Margaret Liu Clinton

The idiom 'in black and white,' which refers to black text printed on a white page, often follows a truth claim that seems so evident it must be obvious. One may dispute print as a medium for delivering proof but the polarity of the idiomatic dichotomy bespeaks immediate access to precise and indisputable facts. It is this logic of factuality that structures the production of common sense.

In his first two installations of *Black and White Tales* Carlos Motta deploys multiple media to unsettle historical accounts of Post War U.S. military interventions. His concomitant extension and manipulation of received historical knowledge disrupts the production of common sense in two ways. First, Motta estranges official speech acts and images through technological distortion and then provides printed texts that present missing narratives or link seemingly unrelated incidents of violence.

He inverts our expectations as his use of text operates in the service of figuration while his use of image and sound operate in the service of abstraction. Rather than denouncing the possibility of true accounts, these compromised modes of representation throw the standard conduits of evidence into question.

Motta situates the viewer between these three modes in his first installment of this cycle, "SOA: Black and White Paintings # 2." Centrally placed, an image of troops advancing down a hillside, culled from the photojournalistic press, is enlarged to human scale, printed onto black and white vinyl and affixed to the back wall. The front line guard, placed at appropriate standing height from the ground, crushes towards the lone viewer.

To the left a single audio speaker, mounted on a pedestal, and encased under plexi-glass, amplifies distorted speeches from the seat of U.S. counter-insurgency training in the Southern Hemisphere, The School of the Americas. The orator's meter is sped up to an absurdly high pitch or slowed down to a diabolical bass, all the while sheltered under protective cover. First and third person narratives are transposed so that charges originally made against the enemy are reflexively rearticulated to indict the speaker. The sonic and textual manipulations metaphorically underscore the rhetorical equivocations common to patriotic speechwriting. We strain to hear legitimating tales about threats to 'freedom' and 'democracy' that the S.O.A. formulates and invokes in their ideological struggle to evacuate doubt and secure support.

To the right, a stack of newspapers, detailing a brief history of U.S. interventions throughout Latin America since 1946, waits to be picked up, read and dispersed. The cover of this compendium is marked with bloody handprints that refer to the signature of the 'White Hand' (Mano Blanca) death squads of El Salvador and signal the violence one finds documented inside. Historical citations of insurrection, insurgency, torture, disappearance and murder produce an overwhelming toll of civilian deaths claimed by the C.I.A. and S.O.A. graduates in affiliated organizations. The absence of physical and psychic representation, via image or testimony, parallels the absence of these lives in previously unconnected histories. It is this chorus of

the missing, the tortured and the dead that we carry away with us.

Motta's second tri-partite installment of the cycle, "SOA: Black and White Tales," addresses subject interpellation through pedagogy and viewership. A 40-foot by 30-inch blackboard spans the length of the main wall and is flanked by two small shelves with chalk and chalkboard erasers for viewers to dispense at will. Stage left we find a listening and reading table, replete with journalistic articles, S.O.A. watch group announcements and conflicting narrative accounts. Stage right, a triptych of 'pain-tings.'

Using white chalk, Motta recreates excerpts from a PowerPoint presentation found on the official S.O.A. website. Using yellow chalk, Motta interrupts the official presentation by inserting commentary, addenda and counter-narratives. No longer fixed or authoritative this corporate presentation, now deskilled, is made vulnerable to reinscription. By recuperating the form of the blackboard Motta calls attention to the pedagogical processes of indoctrination and points out cracks in the presentation's discursive totality. Ultimately, all narrative and counter-narrative operations are left open for contestation. Rather than read this move as complacent or relativizing, Motta heeds Walter Benjamin's claim that history is a field comprised of contestatory accounts in which meaning is to be constantly struggled overⁱ. This work exceeds the tepid participatory regimes of relational aesthetics by resituating interactivity as a process that must anticipate and acknowledge social antagonisms.

Using the methods of reproduction graphics to generate paintings Motta emphasizes the affective potential of press photography. His abstractions push figures to the verge of becoming unrecognizable. This critical point of disappearance forces the viewer to take several steps back in order to register the scene, thereby curtailing a cursory glance. Motta's use of degraded figuration does not aim to deny events rather it stills us long enough to absorb them. In the first image, we recognize a crowd of soldiers, standing in formation, uttering a solemn pledge. In the second image, a crowd huddles over a slain victim who is probably a civilian. This fact is neither clear nor important, since the primary objective of the image's ambiguity is to demonstrate death's indifference to political loyalties. The most visceral of three images renders a fallen soldier. The corpse slumps over a three quarter horizon that is divided into a silent white ground and an eternal black background. The rifle, no longer supported by the right arm juts into the soldier's helmet.

We can presume that the figure is an S.O.A. graduate but the defeated portrayal is neither triumphant nor cynical. Instead we are led to think about the troops and insurgents currently fighting in Iraq. We begin to contemplate U.S. interventions as part of an ongoing cycle.

Although the School of the Americas has changed its name, its mission and tactics remain constant. If yesterday's threat was Communism, today's threat is Terrorism and the borders between 'friend' and 'enemy' are relocating accordingly. As sovereignty breeds new justifications for intervention it also breeds new antagonisms with long histories. We must return to these histories to aid us in considering the ramifications of intervention at every turn.

ⁱ See Benjamin, W alter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Illuminations. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) pp. 253-264.