

THE DISCOMFORT ZONE



WHY COLOMBIAN
SCULPTOR DORIS
SALCEDO — WINNER
OF THE FIRST NASHER
PRIZE — MATTERS

by MICHAEL GRANBERRY

On the last day in September, Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, whose provocative, political statements have honored the victims of violence and repression around the world for three decades, was named the winner of the inaugural Nasher Prize for sculpture. Salcedo, 57, will receive the \$100,000 award and a commemorative object designed by architect Renzo Piano at a special ceremony in Dallas in April. The Nasher will present at least a sample of Salcedo's work that month. "I think it was a bold choice," says Jeremy Strick, the director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, of the artist chosen by seven international jury members, all experts in the field of sculpture. "And when you come to know the work of Doris Salcedo, it's an absolutely logical choice." Salcedo's career "powerfully articulates the importance of sculpture for our time," he says. "If you wanted to choose an artist whose work expresses why sculpture can matter, Doris Salcedo is that artist."

The Nasher Prize stands alone in the world: No other international prize cites sculpture specifically, and its \$100,000 is the

Doris Salcedo's *Untitled*, 2003 — it was made of 1,550 chairs piled three stories high — in an Istanbul ghetto where Greek and Jewish minorities once lived.



Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, 2007, in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London. The work, since deinstalled, was a statement about racism. The 500-foot-long crack represented, for Salcedo, the gap between white Europeans and the rest of humanity.

same amount given to the winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize. Nasher officials describe the award as one that recognizes artists “who have had a significant impact on the understanding of the art form.” Salcedo fits the bill precisely. Many people may think of sculpture as something that is seen and admired in such classical settings as the piazzas of Florence, Italy — but the definition has broadened considerably, no more so than over the last 30 years, which marks the time frame of Salcedo’s career. She is a master at merging found objects, such common materials as furniture, shirts, needles and dirt, into instruments of storytelling that carry with them lasting political impact.

For Salcedo, who believes her task as an artist is “to connect worlds that normally are unconnected, like art and politics, like the experience of the lost lives of victims of political violence with the experience and memories of the viewers who approach or contemplate the work,” the prize is very meaningful. It “helps to acknowledge that in the midst of violence, in the midst of political conflict, there is room for thought and room for producing art that is meaningful to all of us.” When Colombian journalist and peace activist Jaime Garzón was assassinated in 1999, Salcedo memorialized his passing by filling Bogotá’s plaza with tens of thousands of votive candles and laid down a 2-mile-long path of red roses. In Istanbul, in 2003, she piled empty chairs three stories high in a crumbling ghetto that once housed Greek and Jewish minorities. And in London, in a memorable show at the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, she employed a jagged, 500-foot-long crack in the floor of the elite museum to symbolize a seismic fault line. “It represents borders, the experience of immigrants, the experience of segregation, the experience of racial hatred,” Salcedo said of *Shibboleth* in 2007, when the show opened. “It is the experience of a third-world person coming into the heart of Europe.” Her work is about mourning, she told the *Chicago Tribune* in February, and the condition of the mourner. “Every time a person is killed, there is an absence that is created in us, and that absence should be addressed. And that is particularly important in Colombia or in countries where missing people are counted by the thousands.”

Nasher officials solicited nominations for candidates by sending out 100 letters to scholars, museum directors and artists around the world. They returned the names of more than 80 candidates, which resulted in about 55 nominations, because multiple experts suggested the

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same sculptor. University of Michigan professor Alexander Potts was among the seven who selected Salcedo as the winner. He salutes her for pushing the boundaries of sculpture. It’s easy to feel, he says, that her work is “anchored in some quite profound experience.” Juror Phyllida Barlow, herself a sculptor, described Salcedo’s art as being more than simple political content. “It was a whole way of where deeply felt, personal, intimate experiences would meet a public exposure of that, which is a highly complex chemistry.”

When the jury began its work last summer, Strick says, “we were not talking so much about refugees fleeing into Europe. Immigration had not become a primary topic of a presidential campaign. The pope had not addressed Congress. But I am hard-pressed to think of an artist who speaks more powerfully or profoundly to this moment in time.”

MICHAEL GRANBERRY writes about art, artists, museums and pop culture for The Dallas Morning News. A version of this story appeared in the News on October 1.