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See The Dallas Installation Of Nasher Prize Winner Doris Salcedo's Thought-Provoking 'Plegaria Muda'

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By Rick Brettell



Photo: Nan Coulter/Special Contributor

For *Plegaria Muda*, Doris Salcedo designed tables with tops that mimic the proportions of coffins. The use of earth and plant life gives the work a subtle natural odor that is linked both to burial and to growth. The Nasher Sculpture Center loosely translates the title of the work as "Silent Prayer."

Velázquez Visual Arts Prize (2010) and the Hiroshima Art Prize (2014) and, just last year, was announced as the inaugural recipient of the \$100,000 Nasher Prize for Sculpture.

At 58, she is truly in the prime of a major international career. Her success is all the more amazing because she was born and trained as an artist in Bogotá, Colombia, a city and country better known for drug wars and political violence than for prominence in the international art world.

What is important about Salcedo's strategy of conquering the larger world through art is that her work is actually rooted in the social and historical problems of her native country. Rather than fleeing into the arms of the London- and New York-based world of contemporary art by avoiding her own homeland, she has actually brought Bogotá and Colombia with her as she creates work that addresses issues rooted directly in her own experience.

With her brilliant mass of gray-black hair, her direct gaze, and her commitment to the idea of art as part of a process of repair for society's tragedies, wars and misdeeds, the Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo has become an international superstar of the art world. Her large-scale sculptural installations have been commissioned in Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East, and individual sculptures by Salcedo are in most of the A-list collections of the 1 percent.

And then there are the accolades: She has received the Ordway Prize (2005), the



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Because the Nasher Sculpture Center’s elegant pavilion-like building by Renzo Piano is too small for a major retrospective of her work and because the time was too short for a new commission, the director and curatorial staff of the Nasher had to decide which, among her existing large-scale installations, was the most appropriate to bring to Dallas for the formal awarding of the Nasher Prize at the museum on April 2.

With Salcedo’s help and the cooperation of her dealer and

the London institution, White Cube, they settled on a piece titled *Plegaria Muda*, which the Nasher translates loosely as “Silent Prayer.” *Plegaria*, in Spanish, is a word specifically linked to a form of public prayer (or the closest English word, a public “pleading”) like the noonday prayer or the *Angelus*, a collective or shared experience. The word *muda* has a double meaning in Spanish, one of change or alteration and the other associated with the closely linked English word “mute.” So, the concept in Spanish is much richer than the English “silent prayer.”

The work, like many of Salcedo’s projects, has had a long gestation. The artist places its origins in a 2004 trip to Los Angeles, where she worked in the city’s southeastern neighborhoods to come to terms with



Photo: David Heald

the reported deaths of 10,000 young people killed in the city’s streets in the previous two decades. Yet this “American tragedy” was only the beginning of this work’s origins in violent cultural murder, because Salcedo also links this sculptural “prayer” to the deaths of 2,500 young people in her native Colombia — murdered by the police from 2003 to 2009.

Plegaria Muda has been installed in several other prominent galleries and museums in Rome, Lisbon, Mexico City, London, Chicago and New York before its Dallas debut. Salcedo customizes each installation, thinking about the unique conditions of each space. Although she often uses actual furniture — chairs, beds, armoires, tables — as the formal grammar of her work, she has departed from this practice in *Plegaria Muda* by designing tables specifically fabricated for the installation, whose tops mimic the proportions of coffins.

These tables are arranged in a dense pattern so that the viewer walks *through* them rather than looks *at* them. Each table is set on the floor, covered with a layer of earthlike material (actually, concrete embedded with organic matter) and then topped with an identical inverted table, whose legs push into the air of the gallery.

During the period of the installation, grass seedlings embedded in the earth between the tables grow, pushing new, fresh green blades into the crevasses of the inverted tables, giving the entire work the quality of a natural performance with all its implied possibility. The use of earth and plant life also give the work a subtle natural odor that is linked both to burial and to growth.

This “healing” element of the piece saves it from what might easily become righteous indignation at needless deaths from drug wars, gun violence and street gangs. Salcedo uses the word “commemoration” when speaking about the work, and curious readers will want to watch a video interview with her about the piece on the White Cube website.

The Nasher Prize is a bold new initiative of the museum, making it one of only four American art museums awarding a significant art prize (the others are the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta). Salcedo is a choice made by a distinguished jury and her accomplishments to date more than justify her nomination and selection by the museum. I will reflect in a later column about the prize itself and its significance both for the Nasher and for its first recipient. Before then, get to the Nasher so you can ponder this important artist’s immense, freighted questions.

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