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Bold and political, Colombian artist Doris Salcedo captures the inaugural Nasher Prize for Sculpture

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By Michael Granberry Published: September 30, 2015 7:30 pm

Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, whose provocative, political statements have honored the victims of violence and repression around the world for three decades, is 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 April. Jeremy Strick, the director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, which commissioned the prize, made the formal announcement Wednesday night at the Rachofsky Warehouse.



Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, the winner of the inaugural Nasher Prize for Sculpture (William Zbaren/The New York Times)

“I think it was a bold choice,” Strick said of the artist chosen by seven international jury members, all experts in the field of sculpture, who picked Salcedo in London over the summer. “And when you come to know the work of Doris Salcedo, it’s an absolutely logical choice.”

Speaking in a recent interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, Strick said Salcedo’s career “powerfully articulates the importance of sculpture for our time. If you wanted to choose an artist whose work expresses why sculpture can matter, Doris Salcedo is that artist.”

The Nasher Prize now stands alone as being unique in the world. No other international prize cites sculpture specifically, and its \$100,000 is the same amount given to the winner of the Pritzker prize for architecture. Nasher officials describe the award as one that recognizes artists “who have had a significant impact on the understanding of the art form.”

Salcedo would appear to fit the bill precisely. The average person 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 politically charged 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.

“The prize is very meaningful to me,” she said in a prepared statement, “because I believe my task as an artist is to make connections — 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 — and I think the prize will widen this audience. The prize 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.”

In its recent review of her show at the Guggenheim Museum, the *New York Times* noted that Salcedo came of age “during an era when civic murder was a way of life in her country and others in Latin America. Governments ruthlessly cut down opposition; the opposition retaliated in kind. Drug wars took out whatever lives got in their path. Entire villages ended up in mass graves. Men and women out for a walk disappeared, evaporated, leaving questions about their fate and a memory of their existence behind like unclaimed luggage.”

When Colombian journalist and peace activist Jaime Garzon was assassinated in 1999, she memorialized his passing by filling Bogota’s plaza with tens of thousands of votive candles and laid down a two-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. For example, the space which illegal immigrants occupy is a negative space. And so this piece is a negative space.”

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 prize 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 happened to suggest the same sculptor.

University of Michigan professor Alexander Potts was among the seven who selected Salcedo as the winner. “What we wanted,” he said, “was somebody who had a significant reputation, who had made a major contribution and was continuing to make a major contribution central to our understanding of what sculpture is. And that what they were doing was particularly pertinent to the moment we’re in.”

He saluted Salcedo for pushing the boundaries of sculpture. He applauded her use of candles as tools of memorialization in Bogota and the symbolism of the crack at the Tate. It’s easy to feel, he said, that Salcedo’s work is “anchored in some quite profound experience.”

Juror Phyllida Barlow described Salcedo’s work 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.”

From her home in London, Barlow said Salcedo offers a lasting connection to those “living in these quite extraordinary times — I would say terrifying times. What is impressive about Doris Salcedo is that she takes her deeply wounded and terrified emotions into the most public spaces that you can think of and makes work that is absolutely fearless” in putting on notice “the very governments that are causing these horrors, these highly personal tragedies. I think it’s extraordinary.”

Strick praised the work of the jury in picking Salcedo, whom he described as an artist who has created lasting memorials “for those who are lost, those who have disappeared, those who are forgotten.”

When the jury began its work last summer, Strick said, “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.”

This is a YouTube interview with Salcedo and below that is a photograph of *Shibboleth* at the Tate Modern:



A visitor examines a crack in the floor titled *Shibboleth*, by Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo, in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London in 2007. The work, which begins as a hairline crack, widens and deepens as it runs the full 167 meters of the hall. Salcedo says the work took her over a year to make. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)