# PATRON

ART / CULTURE / DESIGN


## TOP FORM

*Nasher Prize Winner Doris Salcedo's Sculptural Effect*

## Global Entry

*Dallas Art Fair International Preview*

*Sculptural Form and Meaning,* Salcedo's work, is particularly remarkable for combining vivid sculptural effect with powerful symbolic resonance. It is both compelling sculpturally and sharply political. Running through her work is a persistent concern with the ongoing effects of violent atrocity, sometimes implicit, as in her series of untitled furniture pieces, and sometimes explicit, as in *Unland: audible in the mouth*, *A Fior de Piel*, or *Plagaria Muda*, works which through their titles present themselves as tributes to or memorials of nameless victims of violence. Her work has its origins in her response to the mindless and arbitrary violence of the civil war in her home country, Colombia, and the human cost this has inflicted on its countless innocent victims. For those living in Colombia, as she makes clear, the toll inflicted has become an ongoing part of everyday life, not a state of exception, even now while it is dying down. For anyone approaching her work, however, it is important to recognize that the problem is global, not just local and particular to Colombia. This has become painfully evident recently to many living in the more protected environments of Western Europe or North America as they experience explosions of violence once thought to be localized to parts of the world such as the Middle East, torn apart by armed conflict. Salcedo herself pointed out that one of her works, *Plegaria Muda*, conceived in memory of young men murdered by Colombian government forces so their corpses could be presented for collection of bounty as alleged rebels, might function equally well as a memorial to the disregarded victims of gang violence in cities such as Los Angeles.

While Salcedo's work is charged with content that plays a central role in any viewer's experience of it, the relationship between the particular form a work takes and its meaning or symbolic significance is far from straightforward. This is no fault, but one of Salcedo's distinctive strengths. Meaning is not delivered on a platter or thrust at one. Her works never directly embody either the figure of the victim or that of the

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10, wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass; installation: March 15–June 24, 2012, Museo nazionale delle Arte del XXI secolo (MAXXI), Rome; photograph, Patrizia Tocci

# POETIC GRAVITAS

Loss and trauma define the oeuvre of Doris Salcedo, the inaugural Nasher Prize recipient, whose groundbreaking works bear witness to political violence in her Colombian homeland and around the globe.

Still, one is inclined to imagine the earth as representing soil from mass graves containing disintegrated remains of victims (though it is clearly not literally this), the latter unrecognizable residues of bodies that never had a coffin, let alone a proper burial. These imagined remains are preserved and given a ceremonial dignity by their setting and public display, but are also compressed inside the blocks of soil and, as it were, silenced. The effect of the blocks of earth pressed into the spaces between the tabletops parallels that of the cement embedded inside Salcedo's furniture pieces, particularly as cement has been mixed into the soil so the blocks retain their rectilinear shape. At the same time, the muteness, the silencing is countered by sparely indicated signs of life—scattered blades of grass rising up through tiny holes drilled through the upper tabletops. There is some intermittent regeneration, but firmly held in check; no full re-awakening. The dead remain dead whatever else might show tentative signs of life, while the prayers of those haunted by the loss they represent are silent, hovering on the fringes of a very striking and possibly even calmly vital display that is only distantly reminiscent of an assemblage of coffins or a graveyard for someone first entering the space.

The social reach of Salcedo's work was perhaps most vividly realized in *Shibboleth*, the temporary project she designed for the monumental turbine hall in Tate Modern in London. An irregular crack was opened up in the floor, extending from one end of the building to the other, splitting the smooth, uninflected expanse of concrete. This crack, made of concrete strengthened with wire mesh, was fabricated by Salcedo in Bogotá, transported to London and then set inside a ditch dug out of the floor of the Tate and sealed into place with an infill of concrete. The crack in the floor introduced a split in the gallery's main public gathering area, deep enough that people had to be attentive to it, if they were not to stumble or catch their foot as they crossed over it. Still, it did not come over as overtly threatening, even if it was a fairly striking intrusion into the fabric of the building. *Shibboleth* stands a little apart from most of Salcedo's work in that its significance as suggested by the title and the comments made by her do not conform to her pervasive theme—memorializing victims of

Artist Doris Salcedo

Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007, concrete and metal, length 548 ft.; installation: October 9, 2007–April 6, 2008, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London

violence and processes of bereavement and mourning—nor is there any suggestion that it had its origins in events taking place in the civil war in Colombia. The meanings associated with it have to do with the broader social and political environment of the modern metropolis, exemplified by the actual environs of this gallery in the heart of London.

The title refers to the idea of a test phrase, a shibboleth, used to root out those who don't belong from those who do. The word has its origins, as Salcedo has explained, in an Old Testament story in which members of a defeated group of Israelites seeking to escape across the river Jordan were identified by members of the victorious tribe as strangers by the way they pronounced the word shibboleth, and summarily executed. The crack, seen from the perspective of this story, becomes a barrier to be crossed with peril, a stand-in for the river of Jordan. Equally though, Salcedo has represented it as having a contemporary resonance, with the crack marking out the racist divides in modern society between whites and non-whites, a "history of racism," as she put it, which "is the untold dark side of the history of modernity." Seen in this way, the crack is not a dividing line so much as an intrusion, recalling the presence of immigrants or other marginalized groups excluded by the sameness of white society and consigned to the depths of fissures opening up within the world of more privileged whiteness. It is important that these associations are not entirely consistent but form a field of competing possibilities, thereby echoing the actual character of the public sphere in the modern world.

*Shibboleth* made its most telling mark by literally, for a moment, creating a fault line disrupting the neutral container within which art, even overtly radical art, is usually shown. Instead of bits of the outside world or references to it being brought into the gallery, fractures endemic to the outside world were opened up within an art environment. The effect is not dramatized unduly and did not intrude too insistently on the everyday life of relative privilege enjoyed within the gallery, or even necessarily interrupt the fascination a viewer might feel for the visually compelling reconfiguring of space. However a real sense of intrusion and fracturing was still there, haunting it. This is a particularly suggestive but also materially real instance of Salcedo's ambition to make "a topography of war that was so embedded, really, inscribed in everyday life," prompting one to move beyond the confines of individual consciousness and come up against a "type of knowledge that is greater than oneself, which is so broad socially, in terms of its volume and comprehensiveness, that one cannot grasp its meaning." **P**


Top: Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992–2004, shoes, drywall, paint, wood, animal fiber, and surgical thread, 43 in. and 40 boxes; overall dimensions variable; installation: February 21–May 24, 2015, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; photograph, Patrizia Tocci. Bottom, left: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 2003, one thousand one hundred and fifty wooden chairs approx. 33 x 20 x 20 ft.; ephemeral public project, 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 2003; photograph, Sergio Clavijo. Bottom, right: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1998, wooden armoire with glass, concrete, steel, and clothing, 72.25 x 39 x 13 in. Collection of Lisa and John Miller, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

quite different from flesh, in which form it would be a gruesome, flayed skin. The process of its making similarly has a double resonance. The stitching together suggests a restitution, a making whole; at the same time, the petals were obtained by dismembering countless rose flowers. Any single idea of what the work means in relation to the fate of the victim memorialized and the gruesome violence perpetrated on her is always a little at odds with other responses one has to it as a material object. It can simply be seen as an incredibly sumptuous and beautiful and also delicate fabric-like spread, and this is integral to its effectiveness. As such it perhaps becomes a worthy homage to the victim, an implication that sits uneasily with the suggestions of bodily pain and dismemberment that are there as a constant undertow.

Salcedo's untitled more traditionally sculpture-like furniture pieces form a persistent thread in artistic production. These solid-looking constructions are assembled from items of second-hand furniture, most of block-like form such as armoires, cabinets, and cupboards with their cavities cemented over, and occasional chairs filled out with cement to take on a more compact shape. These works, which first brought her to the attention of the international art world, are not given an explicit memorial significance. What is more, she has made it clear that the furniture from which they are fabricated had no actual connection with victims of atrocity. Often shown in arrays, which vaguely recall the clustering of assorted pieces of second-hand furniture in a warehouse or shop, they are powerful and haunting works. If the significance they carry is palpably there, though, it hovers at the edge of consciousness, and has no obvious connection with the themes of violence and bereavement that inform much of Salcedo's art. The strong effect has a lot to do with her embedding the empty spaces inside the pieces of furniture with cement. (This necessitated strengthening the wooden structures with a steel frame to prevent them breaking apart under the pressure exerted by the mass of cement.) The furniture has not only been rendered useless in this way but is also muted, almost suffocated. Interiority has been stifled, at the same time that there is also a sense of things being compacted together, with cabinets and armoires jammed inside one another and cemented into place. These strange rather awkward things strongly assert an identity, but it remains unclear what this is, not as a mystery that might be deciphered, but as an assertion of the inherent muteness of things we find oddly striking.

*The Body Social:* The larger social or public significance of the ongoing violence that disturbs the world we live in is as important a factor in Salcedo's work as individual bereavement and suffering. As she explained, "I wanted to make the private things into something public. It's not a private problem. It's a social problem." A number of her more compelling works, such as the 2003 Istanbul Biennial piece, are evidently social in character, designed to exist in a public sphere and take on their meaning from this context. Among her gallery works, there are some too whose expansive presentation makes them more social than individual and subjective in character—most notably *Plegaria Muda (silent prayer).* The prevailing effect here recalls the anonymity of a multiplicity of deaths rather than individual loss. Unlike *Atrabiliarios*, where the remains of the deceased, the shoes, have an individual character, the repeated elements are so similar that at first they seem exact replicas of one another, even though closer inspection reveals that the pairs of juxtaposed tables vary very slightly in size. In this case, rather than using second-hand tables, which would carry distinctive markings, Salcedo had them fabricated in her studio to a uniform format.

In *Plegaria Muda*, each unit is made up of a pair of wooden tables, one inverted table with legs jutting upward placed atop one which is set on the ground. Separating them is a thick block of earth compressed between the flat surfaces of the two tabletops. The area occupied by each unit, defined by length and width of the tabletops, roughly corresponds to that of a coffin, but the units do not otherwise strike one as forming coffin-like shapes. Furthermore, the earth does not surround the wooden armature formed by the paired tables as it would a coffin but is held inside it.

Left and right: Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel*, 2012, rose petals and thread, 257 x 42.25 in., private collection

Above: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: audible in the mouth*, 1998, wood, thread, and hair, 29.25 x 124 x 31.5 in.; collection: Tate Gallery, London; photograph, Patrizia Tocci
Below: Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, 1990, plaster and steel frame, 106 x 140 x 125 in. © Rachel Whiteread. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photo: Mike Bruce

bereaved. The associations conjured up by the works themselves with a violated or suffering body, or the situation of the bereaved mourning a victim's absence, are allusive and indirect. They are made through materials that have been subjected to human use—second-hand pieces of furniture, discarded clothing and shoes, hand-stitched fabric-like surfaces made of organic matter, such as hair or silk, and joins secured with surgical thread. The work is not radically abstract, but it is not conventionally figurative or symbolic either. In this respect, Salcedo's work parallels, albeit in a very individual way, that of two other major female sculptors who came to prominence in the 1990s, the Lebanese British artist Mona Hatoum and the British artist Rachel Whiteread. The parallel with Hatoum is perhaps the closest in that Hatoum's earlier work in particular registered scenarios of pain and loss relating to her experience of armed conflict in Lebanon.

*Unland: audible in the mouth* is one of three works Salcedo gave the title "Unland," each conjuring up the lot of a child devastated by witnessing the killing of his/her parents and burdened by memories of this 'unland' of unspeakable horror. The work consists of two used kitchen tables, a lighter one in pinewood and a darker one in oak, jammed together, with the legs of both tables cut off at the join so as to form a single, long, but also somewhat broken, table. Neither the two tables nor the new un-table have been forced in any overt way to represent a body or bodies. Yet they are not just tables. The lighter table is covered with a thin skein of silk woven into its surfaces, most clearly visible on the top. Towards the join with the other table, the threads of silk begin to be taken over by strands of dark hair similarly woven into the wood, with the darker hair weave eventually superseding the lighter silk on the oak table. The threads run across the width of the tabletops, stitching together the joins between the planks that run from one end of each table to the other. The tables have been painstakingly worked over to become subtly different, almost unreal, though from a distance they still look very much like the ordinary kitchen tables they once were. The weaving suggests a very fragile process of healing or protecting, but it also could be associated with the pain engendered by threads and hair being stitched into the slightly resistant surface of a skin. At the same time, the neatly configured shape and the allure of the lightly textured surfaces make for a simple, almost harmonious presence, creating a calm not totally unlike that associated with conventional sculpture, but never free of a disturbance that haunts the work, not just by virtue of the title, but also because of barely perceptible details in its material make-up that won't let one rest in peace.

Salcedo presents many of her works as meditations on specific acts of violence, but she also at times leaves such associations open, even with work that makes a strong impact. A striking instance is the untitled work she created for the 2003 Istanbul Biennial. A gap that an earlier demolition had opened up between two buildings facing into a small street in Istanbul was filled with 1,150 wooden chairs. She has indicated that the work was inspired by a particular event, but decided not to specify what it was. In this way, she felt it could have a greater impact, conveying the sense of "a topography of war...embedded...in everyday life." It could also, she suggested, evoke the plight of migrants displaced from a war zone who found themselves abandoned, cut off from the world where they had taken refuge. The variety of associations here is the point. The work is an intriguing, and at the same time somewhat disturbing, intrusion in the cityscape—exposing possibly something that shouldn't ordinarily be on view, transforming a gap into a dense accumulation of things rejected and set aside, or, more dramatically, violated and left to rack and ruin. The onus is on the viewer to see significance in a work that is insistently evocative but has no one meaning that makes consistent sense. It faces one as if it were a reality of the social and material environment in which it is embedded.

*Memorials:* One very striking feature of Salcedo's oeuvre is its breadth of scope—ranging from human-scale, individually orientated works to ones that are expansive and more public and social in character. *Unland: audible in the mouth* is clearly in the former category. The title, quoting a line from Paul Celan's poem, *An Eye Open,* redolent of this poet's lyric intensity, evokes the inexpressible rawness of an inner recollection of atrocity so extreme that it cannot be perceived by way of words one hears or images one sees, but only felt directly on the body: "No more to be named, hot, audible in the mouth." At the other end of the scale, there is work such as Salcedo's intervention in Istanbul's urban environment, where both the form and potential meaning are evidently public and social. The works where a sense of inner, subjective life is dominant, are for the most part memorials to the disappeared or murdered. They do not conjure up the actual violence, but rather its oppressive afterlife as a haunting memory that cannot be rationalized away, but only dies with the fabric of memory itself. Salcedo insists that "My work is about the memory of experience, which is always vanishing, not about experience taken from life." Such memory has a double aspect. As she expressed it, "Memory must work between the figure of the one who has died and the life disfigured by death."

In Salcedo's earlier work, the focus on the bereaved is usually to the fore, as in the *Unland* series. The same could be said of *Atrabiliarios.* In this, the shoes installed in small cavities, partly obscured by translucent coverings of cow bladder stitched into the wall with surgical thread, might at first seem fairly straightforward memorials to those captured and murdered and then buried in mass graves. But the search for the graves, the uncovering of the bodies and discovery of the remains, and the often hopeless process of trying to identify them was the task of the bereaved. Salcedo's preserving the shoes and resituating them as individualized testimonials to the "disappeared" has more to do with the process of mourning than the disappeared themselves. An emphasis on bereavement is made explicit in the title. Translating roughly as the defiant or irascible one, *Atrabiliarios* conjures up the responses of those devastated but also outraged by the senseless deaths of loved ones who had been executed anonymously in gratuitous acts of violence. With *A Flor de Piel (to flower of skin)*, the emphasis shifts to the atrocity committed on the body of the victim of violence rather than the pain and loss of the one mourning. This is a disturbing but also singularly beautiful work, a blanket or shroud made of rose petals intricately stitched together and specially treated to preserve their deep red hue. Originating in Salcedo's response to the killing of a nurse whose body was savagely dismembered, it is generally seen as symbolizing a painstaking restitution of the dispersed body fragments. However, if this is one possible response, it is far from being the only one. What is formed from the weaving together of the petals is less a body as such than a possible wrapping of a body or shroud. It could also be seen as a second skin of flowers,