



Sin título, 1994. *Serie Los muertos*. Carbón sobre papel, 24.5 x 33.5 cm.
Colección Ernesto Flores. (Detalle).

Museo de Arte de Zapopan / septiembre - noviembre, 2011

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MARTHA PAGHECO
EXPOSICIÓN ANTOLÓGICA

english

Meat

Some months ago I was urgently called home to Canada to visit my father who had suddenly taken ill. I arrived too late. I could see that this was so the minute I cast eyes on the faces of family members gathered in the corridor outside his hospital room. After a few words with them I was invited in to view his body. My reflex response was to say "no." And so I lingered in the hall with the living until they departed. At that point my mixed feelings about looking at a man in death about whom I had such mixed feeling in life overflowed, and I yielded to a troubling curiosity blended with an even more troubling sense of relief at the finality of the occasion.

Crossing the threshold into pale yellow room I found his body carefully laid out under a simple white sheet. It's absolute immobility and unresponsiveness stunned me. Not because I expected that this habitually sedentary and self-absorbed man would have miraculously changed his ways but because one can never really appreciate the full meaning of "lifelessness" except in the presence of physical beings that have definitively lost all trace of their former vitality.

A person in a vegetative state or a coma is not lifeless in that way. And as comforting as it may be for us to think so and as convenient as it has

historically been for funerary artists to exploit the superficial similarities, death is not sleep. Sleepers stir; the dead never move muscle. But neither is morbidity truly static. Rather it is a state of gradual change of creeping, degenerative flux. Thus the longer I stood over my father corpse the more alert I became to not only to the failure of his lungs to rise and fall and the corresponding the lack of distinction that now existed between the inside and the outside of his partly opened mouth where air defined the space around his teeth and lips yet did no longer passed between them, but to the patches of purple discoloration that had started to invade the skin around his neck and head and the extreme contrasting pallor of his normally flushed cheeks. These involuntary impressions reminded me of similarly intense but "unspeakable" ones that had fascinated me at the birth of our first child. Specifically I recalled the dramatically different shades of sanguinary red that coated the infant's body and flooded from its mother's womb. Nevertheless, I did speak of these marvels while trying to distract my wife from the pain of final her ultimate contractions. Later, when she gently chided me on having been so preoccupied by aesthetic matters, I told her how Claude Monet

had become mesmerized by the chromatic transfiguration of his first wife Camille's face while painting her portrait as she was dying of consumption.

So there I was contemplating the same phenomenon on the features of a ninety-five year old man who, having lost his father and a brother at a tender age - drawn to his father's bedside shortly after he expired my father vividly remembered remarking on the palpable cooling of his flesh - and who having witnessed the World War II in the Pacific, was obsessed by and terrified of dying but now, with an uncharacteristically calm and oddly bemused expression, seemed entirely given over to and at ease with his own deadness.

When the spirit departs all that remains is meat. Depicting the dead as they truly are does not evoke the spirit as a counter-image. No out-of-body essence hovers over a corpse.

Autopsy is not a sacrament; although rigorously dispassionate, routine and professional it is medical butchery. Like peeling an onion what it proves more anything else one might discover in the process - notably the cause of death - is that the metaphysical core of being, the seat of the soul cannot be found once the soul has gone. Yet the totality of such an existential void is hypnotic. As horrified as we may be by the sight of such an absence, once we have glimpsed it we cannot take our eyes away.

This Martha Pacheco knows from the lids of her unblinking eyes to the tips of her un-squeamish and insatiably probing fingers. Her art proves that "visions" come to those who look longest and hardest at those things from which others avert their gaze, or of which, from time to time, they sneak a peek without being able to bear for very long the blank stare those things return. In short, hers is an art in which the real in all its extremes eclipses the surreal. One where the hard-won image of an actuality unflinchingly scrutinized burns deeper into consciousness than the most fantastic of hallucinations.

A moment ago I spoke of how autopsies were performed to identify the cause of death but how they invariably failed to locate the spark of life, or at least where that spark had formerly been. However, such procedures are also at a loss to explain deaths that seem to have no reason, which is to say the most common forms of death in places where people who are neither old nor obviously diseased perish regularly and in large numbers. For that one would need to perform an operation on the body politic. Viewed from that larger perspective, death is never without a reason no matter how absurd, no matter how disproportionate the provocation that lead to it is in relation to the world-destroying consequences it brings. In those circumstances, death is never just a question or individual fate, of

personal bad luck but always of a systemic malaise, indeed of chronic social ills that trigger plagues of violence. Accordingly the thing that kills is not just a bullet or a fusillade, a knife, a rope around the neck, a plastic bag over the head, a vicious blow to the skull, the devastating impact of a car driven full speed at or over someone helpless to escape it. Nor is it even the cumulative effects of alcohol or chemical intoxicants, combined with malnourishment and overwork compounded by the intolerable lack of tenderness that wear the spirit down until it barely flickers or dares not show itself openly.

What kills before any such acts of violence occurs or any such gradual poisons take their toll is a brutal disregard for life itself in places where ordinary existence has lost meaning and civil society has lost its hold. In such places the cult of death evolves all consuming rituals that give its everyday, apparently indiscriminate visitations significance. And so the popular press publishes the most gruesome pictures of deaths foretold - it is in such pornography of violence that people catch their superstitious peaks at death without having to fully register its implacable regard - and popular music celebrates murders as if they were glamorous media exploits, for which purposes it is necessary to suppress the grim sights and nauseating smells to which eye-witnesses could testify if they were so reckless as to do

so. Spectacle ushers the public into realms of mythic fatality where it takes refuge from the hideously banal reality of its collective plight.

With the simplest of means expertly and severely deployed Martha Pacheco refuses to aestheticize death, or, for that matter, "madness" whose cult is also pervasive and equally pernicious. Rather, in a manner I attempted to suggest in words at the outset, she shows us in line and color what we become after we are gone. The undeniable refinement of these drawings defies the idea inherited from the Enlightenment - and from Emmanuel Kant in particular - that an irredeemably ugly subject cannot become a beautiful work of art. Thus a meticulously faithful rendering of polychrome organs on a metal morgue table achieves the intensity of a floral still life - what the French appropriately enough call "*une nature morte*" - without every betraying the harrowing nature of the objects portrayed. Thus flowing black lines elegantly describe the removal of a forehead from the bone beneath, or bright reds, oranges, pinks and blues show us the inside of a skull from which the brain has been extracted leaving us to ponder - like the peeled onion - the sight of a body utterly devoid of feeling, vacant of mind. Of course, it is easy to say such things, but it is hard to train one's eyes on them, and especially unnerving to train one's mind on a mindless mass of inert flesh.

Paradoxical demands of this order define the conceptual component at the core of Pacheco remorselessly visceral art. We cannot see death; we can only think it. But just as we begin to do so we cross into the domain of the unthinkable since its mysteries are impenetrable if one takes a religious of mortality and if one takes the secular view then there are no mysteries to consider just the unyielding limitations of fact. Is Pacheco, as the poet wrote, "too much in love with death?" That is not for me to say since how much too much may be varies greatly. However, as I tried to indicate before, whatever reasons she has for being in death's thrall have as much to do with the cultural, social and political context in which she lives at this historical moment as with any private predisposition. What I can say for certain is that as someone coming from another context who knows, respects and

takes very seriously the reality she must contend with, and who, from his own experience, knows how death makes it appearance and what it does to those to whom it shows its face, Pacheco's art rings true in ways that so much that is comparably graphic fails to. Indeed it points out and condemns such failures with an accusing finger as forcefully as that same hand grasps our collars, turns our head and makes us pay attention to images of a reality that is nearly unendurable. Does this work require a strong stomach? Yes, I suppose so. But it requires - and bespeaks - a still stronger spirit.

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Brooklyn, 2011



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