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The Invisible Picture

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The Invisible Picture

by

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my parents; Herlinda Sifuentes and Refugio Aragón, for providing me with the education they were denied, for always believing in me, and for teaching me that hard work will always pay off. I also want to dedicate it to my good friend Kim Bauer, for supporting and encouraging me all this time.

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Abstract

The Invisible Picture

Miguel A. Aragón, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Leslie Mutchler

This report outlines the conceptual, procedural and formal descriptions of the artistic development I have acquired over the course of the past three years. The current violent events caused by the War on Drugs in México –my home country- led me to this research. Beginning with the idea of erasure as language, I concentrated on the use of processes that are reductive in nature to create the bodies of work mentioned in this report.

Thousands of people die in drug-related violence every year in México; by using metaphors and visual metonymies to tie together process and subject matter I explore the idea of perception, memory and transformation. I believe my work is derived from a need to find meaning in these brutal events that repositions the corpse in our field of vision, reminding us that our physical existence is finite.

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Introduction

Growing up on the US-Mexico border exposed me to multifaceted cultural experiences; learning both languages and cultures pushed the limits of my thirst for knowledge and has forced me to seek a balance between these two cultures through a process of acculturation that has defined who I am.

I have translated these cultural patterns and relentless curiosity into my research as an artist by integrating different mediums, often working through processes, to fit together the different elements by creating conflicts, exploring contrasts and commonalities between materials and mediums. The outcome depends on a genuine connection between the materials and their transformations through one or a series of actions, always looking for different ways to implement this compilation of processes or techniques driving me to blend the pieces together to create something new.

My practice and research is derived from a desire to learn, understand and to arrive at some sort of resolution between mediums. This resolution mimics that way in which I have come to embrace my cultural duality.

However, my work is not merely formal experimentations between process and materials; I believe art is at its strongest when it has a practical purpose. Art is communicative and very much bound up with the struggle, as old as human consciousness, to shape the world in accordance with beauty and the requirements of freedom, with life, as it ought to be.

Art can extend beyond itself to become an act of reform, influencing public opinion, public action, and public contribution. It seeks to impact the viewers' perception, to describe the struggle that our society is going through, to take us into unknown places, and to remind us of the possibilities that exist in life.

An art of passage, about reality that has already passed by... and which leaves a spread or spray of traces. Like the pulse of red that stays on the desert horizon for some minutes after the sun has set, or the lemon-colored track of urine in the snow. Art that shadows reality, delicately following in its half-blurred tracks, sketching it from afar.

Susan Sontag¹

The process of perception routinely alters what we see and perception ends at death. The fear of death and the desire to see and understand are the most important impulses in human action and thought; in fact they are the origin of human culture². When we view something with a preconceived concept we tend to carry those concepts into the image. However, when objects are viewed without a preconceived notion, our mind will try to reach for something that it already recognizes in order to process what is viewing.

With memory, just like with perception, our brain uses an intelligent guessing process to reconstruct the past. Memory is a recording device; however it is a flawed one, it does not capture moment by moment events but rather it tends to act as a puzzle in which we have to piece together our memories. Just as we make educated guesses in perception, our minds' best educated guesses help to "fill in the gaps" of memory.

The content and sources for my images come from photographs published by the media; both in digital and in printed form, which depict very crude and raw forensic evidence. These photographs deal with the Mexican Drug Cartel Wars in which Ciudad Juárez, my native city, has been a primary battleground in the violent war between rival cartels and law enforcement agencies that battle for control of the drug trade into the United States.

¹ Susan Sontag, "An Art of Passage," in *Diario per immagini, Marilu Eustachio* (Milan: Spatia Books, 1981), p.6

² Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner eds., *Six Feet Under: Autopsy of our relation to the Dead* (Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2006) p.8

Violence and death is now found everywhere, from the streets to the media to entertainment; the exhausting crime wave has affected everyone in the city; public life is paralyzed as thousands of businesses have closed and most people try to go out as little as possible or do not go out at all. People live constantly with the fear of being extorted, kidnapped, or simply hit by a stray bullet. More than 1,500 people were killed in 2008, in 2009 there were 2,665 casualties and in 2010, a total of 3,116 executions were recorded in the city.

Everyone is now confronted daily with images of crime, mutilation, murder and war in Juárez and the rest of México, causing a closer and direct sense of mortality; whatever sense of meaning we had developed now has a direct relationship to our surroundings. Such events amplify death and our understanding that it can be sudden and certainly inevitable.

However, direct contact with the dead is avoided in our society. People know that they have to die, and while this knowledge is at times depressing, it is not overwhelmingly so as death usually belongs in the future not the present. It forms the limit to all hopes and desires but also the limit to all fears and threats. Death is an invisible picture on the wall, giving meaning to all the other pictures. It is present because it is missing, and it is missing because it will arrive at some stage. But when this presence is permanent as is in the case of Juárez and México then the invisible pictures submerges everything else in its shadows³.

In Robert Bevan's book *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (2006), the author argues that the destruction of a nation's landscape shatters its culture and morale, as well as acts as a deliberate act of eradicating a culture's memory. I see these

³ Thomas Macho, "The Return of the Dead after the Modern Age" in *Six Feet Under: Autopsy of our relation to the Dead*, p.15

events in Juárez and México as the cartels' deliberate actions to make powerful statements in control. These violent acts are affecting the perception of authority and violence within society reshaping the quality of life in the country. We are being confronted with the understanding of a finite life on a daily basis and altering our relationship with the corpse and death. Repression, catharsis, devaluation of symbols, metaphorisation, the invention of substitute rituals, neutralization, black humor and other means are re-used in new ways in order to deal with our natural awkwardness when faced with the idea of death and above all with the dead body⁴. The frightening aspect is the continuous present appearance of a dead person, as the presence of an identifiable living being taken out of this world and the imminence of our own death.

⁴ Bernhard Fibicher, Matthias Frehner, *Six Feet Under: Autopsy of our relation to the Dead*, p.8

Erasure as Technique

I'm trying to put these things together and say that this is part of our world. It's a kind of narrative that has some kind of historical resonance to it –it has to have a resonance that goes beyond the illustrative.

Leon Golub⁵

My work use techniques and processes that are reductive in nature; this is important because it creates a direct connection between the idea and the execution. The act of destroying the original to create an image is directly related to the notion of trying to erase from our consciousness traumatic events that are experienced on a daily basis in México due to the continuous violence. Trauma as a psychic phenomenon is located on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion, experience and its absence in repetition. But trauma cannot be the central category in addressing the larger memory discourse; both are marked by instability, transiency, and structures of repetition⁶.

My work is not about the suppression or the negation of what an image represents, but it is about obscuring it in order to create a different relationship between such image and the viewer. Using erasure as language, rather than being destructive, contains the potential to provoke an ambiguous and shifting reading of the work.

The initial impression of any erasure in an artwork is often that of a destructive act and the deletion takes its form from a particular image, one that deals with death. However, I am using this act as symbolic for purge, which suggests a cleaning and

⁵ Susan Hagen, "Nancy Spero and Leon Golub interview". *Philadelphia City Paper* December 6., 2001, <http://archives.citypaper.net/articles/120601/ae.art.iview.shtml>

⁶ Andrea Hyusen, *Present Pasts: Urban palimpsest and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) p.8

purifying process rather than a violent destruction. Our dealings with the dead are still colored by the idea that death is our enemy and that the dead will contaminate us and make us companions of their new existence; Freud claims that “in hardly any other sphere has our thinking and feeling changed so little since the primitive times or the old been so well preserved, under a thin veneer, as in our relation to death”⁷.

Any form of erasure, however violently destructive, can be seen as constructive in some way; something comes through the destruction, the negation of an image is not actually nothing. The negation takes its form from an erasure of a particular image. It is my intention to transform the image, through erasure, from crude and unbearable into a more beguiling or subtle form for presenting such disturbing images; the void thus becomes a space nurturing memory of what was there before engaging the viewer into a more lasting experience with this difficult subject matter.

What I am looking for, as a result of these deletions is not to forget the horrific crimes these images convey; rather, I am searching for an understanding of what has happened by acquiring a sense of catharsis.

In any partial erasure, the image is neither intact nor destroyed, but both of these possibilities are apparent within the erasure. The erasure involves both the presence, and the negation of the presence. By “erasing” an image, what becomes absent is only further pronounced; deleting such image surely draws attention of the viewer to it and makes it more significant.

In my work the original source image gets abstracted due to the processes and my manipulation of it. Through the decomposition of the original, I am pursuing an ambiguity to better demonstrate ideas of perception and memory. Exploring the idea of

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) p.148

fragmenting a traumatic memory or image, is related to having the mind change its conception of reality in order to cope with stress and deal with the experience. The psyche has mechanisms with which to deal with encounters of rupture. For instance, the act of constriction refers to the process by which painful memories are “split off from ordinary awareness.”⁸

I feel this is the reflection of Mexican society at the moment. This national collective memory cannot be avoided but we try to continue living a purposeful life by blurring, breaking up, trying to erase those unwanted memories and grapple with mortality; though, they always linger since such traumatic events always leave a harsh impression on us.

I want the imagination of the viewer to be important in the completion of the work. The viewer has to participate in decoding this confusing ambiguity of perception, and while these works could be very much open to interpretation I am trying to direct the viewer’s experience by having a combination of images that are more recognizable and easier to read; therefore, giving specific clues to the revelation of the image and the concept behind it. The crucial visual connection is that between “foreground and distance”, that shifting relationship between figure and ground.

Walter Benjamin claims that the first shock of the new is erased by habit, which collapses the distance between foreground and background; “as soon as we begin to find our bearings, the landscape vanishes at a stroke like the façade of a house as we enter it. It has not yet gained preponderance through a constant exploration that has become habit. Once we begin to find our way about, that earliest picture can never be restored.”⁹

⁸ Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) p.89

⁹ Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000) p.85

The process by which the image evolves into the figure of the corpse becomes perceivable to the senses, the viewer attends the moment of transformation from image to human, both seeing and feeling the disappearance of a human being into the sphere of the purely visual. I want to make the corpse more significant without the using shock value, but by using a quieter, more poetic approach so that there is a better transformation from image to human. These representations of the corpse seek not to reduce fear; nor do they apply layers of appeasing red, but rather force the viewer to confront the horror of death and the state of uncertainty and awareness that México is experiencing.

These events have created the exodus of thousands of residents in the city and have shaped the lives of those who continue to inhabit the city with the ever-present fear of a random death.

You reach a moment in life when, among the people you have known, the dead outnumber the living. And the mind refuses to accept more faces, more expressions: on every new face you encounter, it prints the old forms, for each one it finds the most suitable mask.

Italo Calvino¹⁰

Only through paying very close attention, can the viewer both see and know what these images are all about. We try to see everything all at once, and yet we do not; our eyes do not fix themselves in one place and see an entire image; instead, we see a combination of two things: brief moments when we are looking directly at something specific and several short jerky movements throughout the entire area; but after spending some time we see one long flowing picture, we perceive it all as one.

¹⁰ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver; (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1978), p.94

This is how I am hoping the viewer will read my work, and finally leave with the understanding of what it means to see and live with images, and events like these. In this sense, the visual register often adds important dimensions to written testimonials, creating archives that function as exceptions to the culture of silence so present in the afterlife of collective violence¹¹.

¹¹ Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells*. p.22

Imprints of Events Seen

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes depicted mutilation, torture, rape and many other atrocities performed indiscriminately by confronting sides involved in his *Disasters of War* etchings (plates 1 and 2). With 82 prints in the series, Goya achieved a grim observation of man's potential inhumanity and the true barbarities of war with honesty and immediacy.

In a similar fashion, the *Der Krieg Portfolio* (otherwise known as the *War Portfolio*) by Otto Dix neither glorifies World War I nor heroizes its soldiers but shows unrelentingly graphic images, the horrible realities experienced by someone who was there. Dix focused on the aftermath of battle: dead, dying and shell-shocked soldiers, bombed-out landscapes, and graves (plates 3 and 4). These nightmarish scenes are based on his memories of battle, on photographs (including many that had been censored during wartime) and on catacombs rendering meticulously the horror of death and war.

Both of these series were a constant point of reference and inspired me to approach my subject matter with caution. Through a fragmentation and decomposition of the original photographs I decided to make subtle images using metaphors, metonyms and partial abstractions. I am using these gestures as a pictorial strategy to maintain the tension between the overwhelming reality of the remembered events and the tenuous, always elusive status of memory and trauma. I am attempting in having the viewer experience these events without being disgusted or turned away from them. I see the current cultural memory in México as sites of disaster, and as ways to understand the persistence of the state of terror in people's lives, bodies, and subjectivities.

I started to create my work through the use of a laser-cutter; this is a violent process since it uses, via a computer, an output of a high-powered laser to create

cardboard matrixes. The cardboard burns through the process leaving a layer of soot on the surface allowing me to then transfer it to paper. Through the use of photo-editing software I manipulate the image before a matrix is engraved by the laser-cutter; then I selectively remove some areas on the matrix through the use of an X-acto knife so that I can finally transfer the pigment onto paper by using a traditional etching press (plates 5 through 9).

Dix manipulated the corrosive nature of the etching and aquatint mediums to heighten the emotional effects by stopping out ghastly white bones and strips of no man's land, leaving brilliant white patches. He achieved a sense of decay through multiple acid baths that ate away at the images, mimicking decaying flesh. Like him, I am using the process directly to my advantage to draw literal connections between the medium and the idea; connections such as the lack of ink or color to the absence of life, the absence of moral by the perpetrators and the coldness in which these events are carried on.

By only using the burned pigment as the source of mark making I am playing with the idea that those events are burned into the consciousness of the city's habitants; leaving unwanted memories though the continuous first hand exposure to these massacres, shaping the way in which they continue to live their life just as the burned residue leaves a permanent imprint on the paper. There is some variation in tones along with different thickness of embossing once the cardboard matrixes are printed onto paper, which alludes to a more physical degree on the impact of the events, whether it is permanent of merely temporal.

The material on which I am creating the matrixes for these images is one that will decay over time, just as the bodies of the executed will. However, the lasting impression on paper is archival just as traumatic memories tend to be. This is another connection that

I make between the idea and the process and while that might not be apparent to the viewer I found it to be informative in how I create the work.

After completing several images that functioned as ghostly representations that signaled the events' atrocity through this particular technique, I turned to a different process, one in which a power hand drill is utilized as a drawing tool to obviate an image. Similar to the previous pieces, the process of creating an image is done with one that is also fierce in nature; thus, the use of metaphors and visual metonymies are also being applied to tie such process with the content or subject matter. This time though, I started by concentrating on portraits of casualties by the violence, both innocent bystanders and cartel members. Blowing up these portraits enhanced the pixilation of the image allowing me to drill each one at a time, with different size drill bits, through the original matrix and into a stack of paper with a drywall backing. By drilling through the halftone pattern of an image I end up with another form of residue from the original therefore transforming the experience and the image itself (plates 10 through 23).

This process carries a resemblance to the executions in that though the use of a gun shaped tool a human form is being erased. For me, this process is not an act of surrogating to understand the perpetrator's mind when carrying through these violent acts; however, I cannot deny the connection.

The horror of death lies in its propensity to suddenly transform what only moments before was a speaking, breathing body into a silent image –right before our eyes.

Hans Belting¹²

¹² Helga Lutz, "Doubly Dead" in *Six Feet Under: Autopsy of our relation to the Dead*, p.28

The art of Oscar Muñoz, a Colombian artist who primarily uses portraiture in his work, has helped me develop this particular series. Muñoz also works with photographic images collected from newspapers and manipulates them to deal with the transitory nature of life. His water drawings made on sidewalks, disappear before he finishes creating them (plate 24); and his screen-printed portraits on water are then flushed, distorting and making them disappear reflecting the process of recollection, fading memory and alluding to the transitory nature of human existence (plate 25). In his work the viewer witnesses the actual dissolution of an image through time as the manifestation of a person's disappearance or death. Although ephemeral processes define Oscar Muñoz's works the end result is what echoes, something I hope to successfully achieve in my own work.

Teresa Margolles, a Mexican artist who deals with the same subject matter I am dealing with, has also influenced me. Margolles uses bodily substances such as blood, body fat or even the water used to wash corpses symbolically, but also palpably, subtly challenging our fear of contact with death. Her piece, *Muro Baleado/Shot-up Wall* from 2009 was the starting point for this series. This particular piece is an actual cinder block wall from her native Culiacan, México riddled with bullet holes in the aftermath of a drug/gang execution that took place in front of it (plate 26 and 27). Removed from its original site it has been displayed all over the world to reflect the frightening extent to which organized crime dominates Mexican society. Her work, similar to Oscar Muñoz's works, function between presence and absence through distortions and deteriorations in a quieter, poetic and haunting approach engaging with the general taboos surrounding death and violence; using reduced but always drastic means.

Poetry matters, Poetry is what elevates the banal and neglected object to a realm of art. It can transform the thing that might have made people fearful into something that invites them to look, and look a little longer; and maybe even understand.

Aimee Mullins¹³

I am exploring what it means to see, live and cope with images of incomprehensible violence, trying to capture and freeze a specific moment of this dissolution through the fragmentation of crude visual realities while still conveying the transitory nature of memory. Representations of the visible will always show residues and traces of the invisible¹⁴; much like the work of Rachel Whiteread. Her casts have picked up invisible marks of time, such as the wear and tear across windowsills, the detriment of soot from fireplaces, the crusty rust of old bathtubs, and the trapped hairs in discarded mattresses¹⁵. These are captured memories of people, or the communal traces of humankind; a connection that I am also attempting in my work.

Artists reflect the state of mind of their generation; they reflect what is happening all around them. I think it is essential to keep art as the tension point in our intellectual, political and social life, so that it can take us to places where we haven't been before, so that we can grow as human beings. Whether art is trying to lift society or condemn it, this relationship is fundamental in explaining what and who we are. As Cuauhtémoc Medina writes of Teresa Margolles, she "opens a window onto a mentally unfathomable visual

¹³ Aimee Mullins, "Aimee Mullins and her 12 pair of legs" TED Conference Talk, Feb. 2009
http://www.ted.com/talks/aimee_mullins_prosthetic_aesthetics.html

¹⁴ Andrea Hyusenn, *Present Pasts* p.10

¹⁵ Allegra Pesenti "Like Shallow Breaths: Drawings by Rachel Whiteread" in *Rachel Whiteread Drawings*, (Los Angeles: DelMonico Books, 2010), p.9

and cultural chaos, the respectful and distant approach to spontaneous social structures or powers, whose scope [lies] far beyond any mechanism of apprehension¹⁶.”

I am not creating this body of work to give a solution to the problem Mexico is facing; instead, these works are merely representations of the state of uncertainty and awareness that I, my family, friends and the rest of México are experiencing within the realm of human perception, therefore shaping how we relate to the rest of the world and continue with our pursue of happiness within our limited time in this life.

Even now, when I try to remember..., the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.

W. G. Sebald¹⁷

¹⁶ Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Mental Abuse”, in *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (New York: P.S.1 2002), p.40

¹⁷ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, (New York: Random House, 2001) p.24

Plate 1

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Esto es peor.

Plate 2



Grande hazaña. con muertos.

Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11



Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14



Plate 15



Plate 16

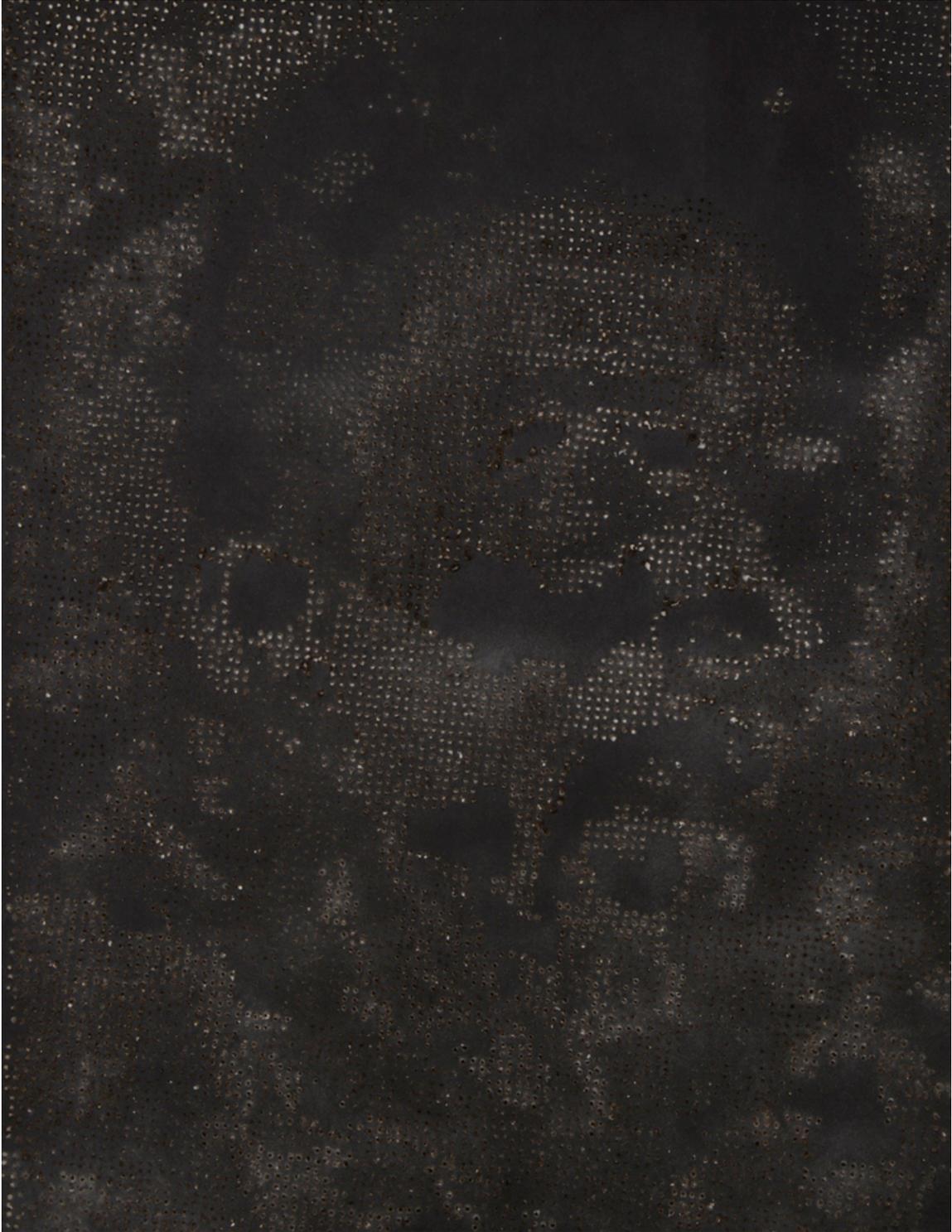


Plate 17



Plate 18



Plate 19



Plate 20



Plate 21



Plate 22



Plate 23



Plate 24

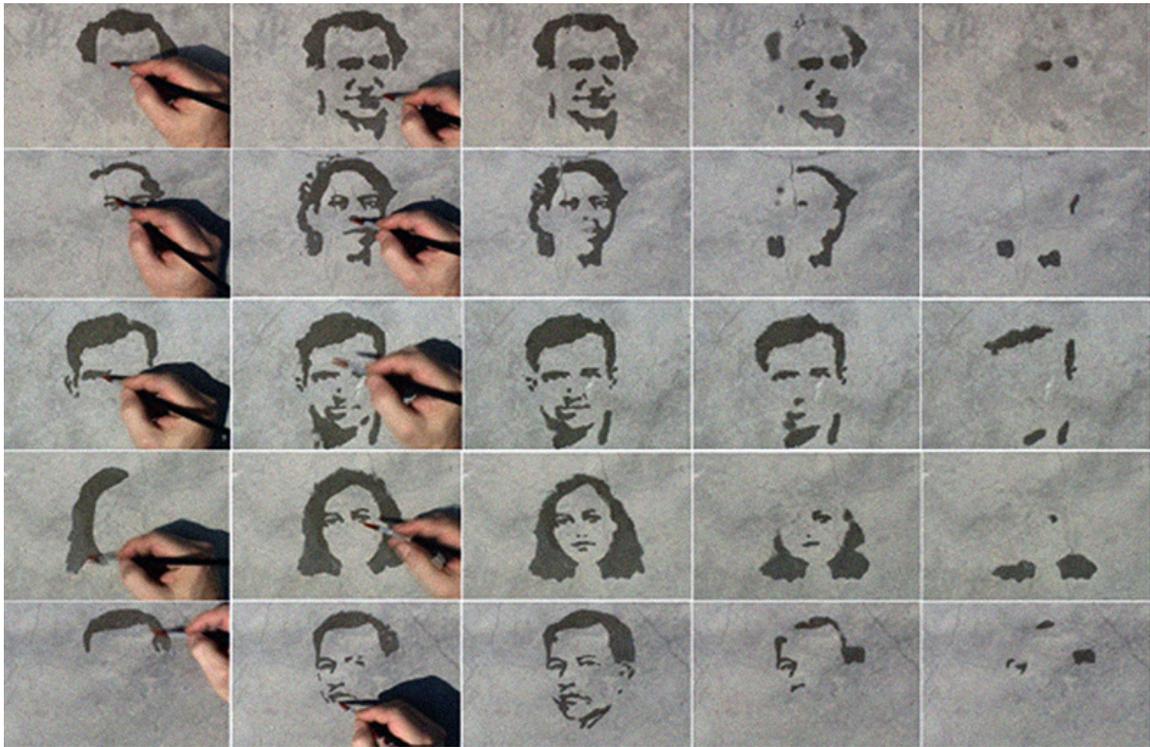


Plate 25



Plate 26



Plate 27



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