

INTERVIEW

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The Raw Truth: Francisco Toledo's *Duelo* and the 43 disappeared of Ayotzinapa.

Famed Mexican artist and activist Francisco Toledo has no hope. In fact, despite decades of awareness raising projects both inside and outside of the studio, he is a self-avowed pessimist and told me in a recent interview that there is no hope for mankind. Activism, of course, contains the prerequisites of promoting and fighting for change, improvement and correcting social and environmental injustices; it implies the possibility of transformation and for human evolution. Toledo believes none of this. On the contrary, in one of our interviews, he states emphatically “man’s barbarism and destruction of the environment and of each other is never going to change.” Perhaps this entrenched hopelessness resides in the fact that he is *not* an activist at all; rather, is described and defined as such from the outside and, specifically from the privileged periphery of the first world. Perhaps, when one has lived the guts of injustice for over seven decades, having no hope makes perfect sense.

In September 2014, 43 students from the rural teacher’s college of Ayotzinapa in Iguala, Mexico were disappeared. What exactly happened to the young people and who is responsible is still unknown and the Mexican government has intentionally impeded investigations. The students were attacked and abducted when they were preparing to attend Mexico City’s commemorative march of the Tlatelolco student massacre of 1968 where an estimated 400 students were slaughtered during a governmental crackdown on student protests. The 43 students of Ayotzinapa were undergraduates at Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos, a teacher’s college with a history of activism made up largely of indigenous youth who are studying to teach the also predominantly indigenous, rural poor. It is both brutally ironic and highly symbolic that the murders and disappearances in September 2014 occurred when the students were organizing to march at the annual commemoration of the Tlatelolco Student Massacre. Both 1968 and 2014 were crimes against the nation’s youth who were dedicated to social justice in Mexico. Toledo comments upon the intensified horror when this violence “is directed against young people, destroying these people who are studying to build the nation, and suddenly these criminals and governors show up and attack them. What man destroys never comes back.” Nevertheless, despite the Mexican government’s cover up of both massacres, 1968 and 2014 both continue to reside in the hearts’ of the Mexican people. It is Ayotzinapa that pushed the Mexican people onto the streets en masse in protest and outrage against the government. However, since 2014, regardless of continuing protests, international outreach and accusations of human rights violations from numerous NGOs, nothing has been done to provide a thorough and transparent investigation of the Ayotzinapa case. Toledo expresses how: “[Ayotzinapa] is going to remain like a stain on the history of Mexico, like the student massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968: year after year, it gets ... memorialized—and so will this.”

Immediately following the disappearances of 2014, Francisco Toledo began to work. He told me how he decided to leave behind an account of this crime, of these forty-three people and their forced

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disappearance. Since the news had a major impact all over Mexico, all over the world, it seemed appropriate to leave behind an account of how horrified we all were.

In one year, Toledo created one hundred and fifty ceramic sculptures inspired by and dedicated to the 43 disappeared. One hundred of these sculptures were exhibited at Mexico City’s *Museo de Arte Moderno* from October 2015 to March 2016 as *Duelo*.

The word ‘duelo’ has two meanings in Spanish. From an Anglophone perspective, one can presume the first: the root originating in ‘duel’ denoting two and a fight between two forces. However, this use is uncommon in Spanish. In the Spanish lexical context, ‘duelo’ denotes ‘grief and suffering’ and, according to Toledo, may come from ‘dolor,’ which means ‘pain.’ This is how the artist uses the word in the naming of his exhibit. In his mind, there is no fight: there is only an expression of “the incredible pain you feel when you lose family members or close friends.” There is no duel in Toledo’s duelo: any fight has been reduced to a most brutal, honest and direct testimony of the grief and anguish felt by a people who live the fear that violence in Mexico will never change. Indeed, the ceramic sculptures in *Duelo* are true to that fear.

Upon entering *Duelo* at the *Museo de Arte Moderno*, one is greeted by a life-sized ceramic cannon. This cannon has made other appearances in the artist’s oeuvre and he told me how it refers to a specific cannon from a story he was told as a child:

“When there was a Juchitec revolt in 1910 against the state government, when Juárez Meza was governor, the federal government sent a cannon to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to crush the revolt, and it seems that the Juchitecos took the cannon from the soldiers but didn’t know how to use it; when they did manage to fire it, the cannonball fell on their own homes. And so I think this is a kind of myth.”

In contrast with the overt destructive capacity of a real cannon, however, the cannon of *Duelo* has no mouth, no opening from which its power can emerge. The cannon is distinctly phallic and yet ceramic straps restrain its cultural potency and the head could be a cannon ball that is being forced backwards and becoming a gag that serves to silence any potential for voice and resistance. Like the mythical cannon apprehended by the Juchitecs and then unwittingly turned on their own people, Toledo's cannon is overtly aimed at his own exhibit. Indeed, in the cultural context of a national regime that has regularly pointed its guns at its citizens, this initial gesture of brutal irony is a most potent gatekeeper for what is to come.

The ritual of skinning has been a weapon of symbolically dominating adversaries throughout the history of Mexico. In Pre-Hispanic times, the Yopis had a custom of skinning people and wearing their skin in dances, and this custom spread to many other areas of Mexico. Today, the military/drug cartel complex often skins victims' faces as a gruesome act of dominance and warning. Toledo references the act of skinning in his sculptures of *Duelo* not only to aesthetically convey physical brutality; but also, this peeling back of surfaces can be seen as a symbolic exposure of the quintessential strategy of cover-up implemented by the Mexican government. When discussing the Ayotzinapa case, Jose Miguel Vivanco, the head of the Americas division of Human Rights Watch, stated, "this case was the object of a deliberate cover-up by the highest authorities in Mexico, both civil and military. We have before us two crimes, the massacre and the cover-up." *Duelo* serves as a 'skinning' of the duplicitous historical 'truth' promulgated by the governmental apparatus.

Regardless of what one may like to think, Toledo explained to me how *Duelo* is not an act of resistance at all as that would imply a fight and the possibility of change. Rather, "*Duelo* is ... an accusation, a statement to the government, declaring it internationally, telling the whole world about this injustice." It is an act of raw exposure, an impeachment fixed in fired mud; the sculptures of *Duelo* are flayed and bleeding, whipped down to excruciating expressions of human remains. Like the drug cartels' and Mexican army's collaborations of torture and murder, each ceramic sculpture is an innovation of representational anguish. In one, bloody restraints both suture and stretch a decomposing face; in another, cables that could be worms stitch a decapitated head into a container made of bone ground down to its marrow; and then, a barely discernable face is blotted into the sharp gore that could have been made by the dragged out death from the sawing cuts of a jagged blade and is punctuated by a boot planted firmly in its back. Together, the collection works to strip and hack back surface corruption, the government's armor of impunity, until all that is left are the exposed guts of what really is. *Duelo* is without surface, without skin, an open wound that will never heal, a forever bleeding accusation against the Mexican government as distilled truths for all to see.

Many of the pieces of *Duelo* are urns meant to hold the ashes of the dead. However, in correspondence with the sculptural carnage that unflinchingly declares the government's guilt, those being mourned will not stay put. In one piece, a head strains through the urn's mouth and, from its frozen gape a rope emerges as a tapeworm and connects to the knotted web that fails in its attempt to contain and to keep the dead, dead. In another, a young man's face is being shoved through the urn's mouth like a birthing or a drowning and, with this tension of neither in or out, the torso protrudes from or is being sucked back into the clay and ends up ghoulishly adorning the surface of the vessel. The torso is bent backwards in forced unison with the ceramic curve until the brain stem meets the upturned wailing face of the un-dead. In yet another, a youth strains to free himself, hands clenching the edge of his fate, head bent back and eyes beseeching the raw of such incomprehensible violence. As Guillermo Santos comments in the *Museo de Arte Moderno's* catalogue essay: "The dead are trying to leave the limbo of oblivion Sometimes ... hands are still here in the world of the living, and trying to leave, to escape, but the bodies belonging to those hands are in an impregnable darkness." As sculptural objects, the representations of the students' fate are frozen in an agonizing state of in between.

In correspondence to the Mexican people living in this emotional purgatory, each of the sculptures in *Duelo* are a re-living of the brutality committed upon the Mexican youth, the anguish felt by the families, and the horror of the Mexican people. Unlike the Mexican government's lack of transparency, however, Toledo's vessels of grief are blatant testimonies in the most candid court of law. Toledo explained to me how making the work was very hard because playing with clay by punching it, by tearing holes in it, painting it red, cutting it into pieces: it's tough, it's very hard to do because you relive the events while you're working with the clay.

The artist continued: "there's violence everywhere, but the violence around us is what affects us and what we respond to.... we are considering these students like our relatives or our close friends." Through the emotional proximity and the deep empathy transferred from the living artist to the bodies of clay, the sculptures become narrators of the nation's collective trauma. One piece tells the story of a murder through three basic signifiers: human remains wearing un-done pants, fly down, belt hanging open. Despite decomposition, the human form is still wearing signs of everyday life, but they are open, ready to be removed, the transference from life to death reverberating its arrested state. Moreover, the piece is trapped in a rope like a lassoed calf, dramatizing the necessity to contain and silence the innocence and the hope inherent in the birth of every new generation. In another stark narrative, a bowl contains a lost shoe, always only one, and like a split second frame in a film revealing all, it is in this 'nothing but' that the story is told; the reader/viewer can fill in the gaps. After viewing the show, artist Michael Maclean described how: "I was reading everything I could about this crime, but seeing the show got behind my armor of rage." The sculptures of *Duelo* have the emotive potency to break through the daily onslaught of media facts that readers can, perhaps out of necessity, build up a resistance to. However, *Duelo* is merciless; it does not hold back; the viewer has no choice but to have a visceral response. Like the urns incapacity to hold the dead, the artist related how, in *Duelo*,

"The subject itself makes you turn it over and over in your mind—the color red, the butchered bodies. Ultimately, it all revolves around violence, so everything is red, it's all severed ears, pieces of arms and hands—so that's the constant."

The unresolved reality of the crime has become a pathology that cycles in the national psyche and will most likely never be stilled by absolute comprehension.

In Mexico, the word 'massacre' is not the stuff of Hollywood: it is a reality that is a part of the fabric of the contemporary Mexican consciousness. The number of documented massacres in Mexico since Tlateloco in 1968 has been escalating in the 21st Century. Enrique Krauze's 2016 article, "Confidence in Mexico," reported that "between 2007 and 2014, more than 164,000 Mexicans were killed." Indeed, it follows that "such violence obviously stirs up feelings of insecurity, which nearly 70 percent of Mexicans admit to having." Krauze's article on moral decay in contemporary Mexico is framed by the Students of Ayotzinapa whom he describes as 'the last straw' for the Mexican people. He continued to describe the Students of Iguala as "kindred spirits of those massacred in the Tlatelolco plaza of Mexico City in 1968" and claimed that this connection is one of the reasons why the 43 disappeared have attracted so much national and international attention.

Jorge Fons' 1990 film *Rojo Amanecer* depicts the 1968 Student Massacre at Tlatelolco Plaza, the largest apartment housing-complex in Mexico City, where the Mexican army opened fire on a student protest against government violence and repression. The exact death toll is still unknown and there was no governmental acknowledgement of the crimes until a token official investigation in 2001 announced by the Vicente Fox government. Like the now disproven 'Historical Truth' where the Mexican government claims that the students of Ayotzinapa were taken away by local police on the orders of the mayor of Iguala and handed over to a drug-trafficking gang, which killed them and incinerated their bodies in a nearby trash dump, the NPR

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tells us how the government used the same tactic of side-stepping any involvement by alleging “that the students [at Tlateloco] — infiltrated by communist forces — had fired on the army, and the soldiers had to fire back to defend themselves.” In the face of the official silences, denials, evasions, and blocked investigations of both the 1968 massacre and 2014 disappearances, both Fons’ film and Toledo’s sculptures enact similarly blatant gestures by inverting the displacement of the cultural trauma and placing the crimes at the heart of the Mexican society: both artists set their ‘historical truths’ of the massacres in the essential context of the home.

Rojo Amanecer takes place within the intimacy of a Tlateloco apartment. The viewer does not see the massacre directly, but we can hear it and experience its emotional and psychological effects through the reactions of the characters. By not directly showing the external cause, the chronic effects of institutionalized fear are foregrounded as the viewer bears witness to the unacknowledged siege on the everyday lives of the Mexican people. Similarly, in *Duelo*, the artist uses bowls and platters as his sites of grief, placing the horror directly within the

domestic space of nourishment. However, *Duelo*’s sustenance is that of decay and deprivation. Some of the platters offer up ghoulish faces strapped down by torture-chamber restraints; another serves up a bloody head with wormlike fetters emerging from the eyes, mouth and bridge of the nose. The worms are decomposing while they simultaneously breed and decorate the meal as a gruesome garnish underlain by a gritty sauce of sand. Another entrée is a skeleton running across the plate. He is hunched and grappling with his own innards that are attempting to flee the ceramic edges of his fate. An almost empty plate offers a skeleton that is fixed to the edge of a bloody bowl abyss, holding on for dear life, eternally gripping so as not to be devoured, even though he is human remains already. In another, the meal is minimal: it is but a rope knot in the middle of the plate—the core fear of never-ending violence is a bind, a knot that defies undoing. Violence and fear are a part of the fabric of life; there is no escape for a people who consume horror daily. Both *Rojo Amanecer* and *Duelo* set the lived truth where it literally exists: down from the duplicitous ether of governmental obfuscations and into the guts of Mexican life.



Directly following the 2014 disappearance of the 43 students, not only did Francisco Toledo begin *Duelo*, he also put out an international call to museums, universities and cultural organizations for original poster art giving voice to the tragedy. From over 700 responses, 43 were chosen to form the exhibit *Carteles por Ayotzinapa* that was shown at Mexico's Museum of Tolerance and is currently touring the US and Europe re-entitled "Ayotzinapa: A Roar of Silence." The 43 posters have also been made into a book. When discussing the activism implicit in this project both at home and abroad, Toledo cited the examples of revolutionary Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo. He explained to me how, when the murals of Rivera and Tamayo were painted, they were political and, especially Rivera's, a scathing critique of the Mexican regime's corruption since Independence. They were also intended to communicate these ideas through images to Mexican people who did not know how to read. However, the murals were not seen by whom they were intended for and now, according to Toledo, the political content has been drained and has become irrelevant: the murals are now seen only as paintings to be enjoyed by tourists and collectors.

In one of our interviews, I asked Toledo about his opinion on the connection between art and social justice. His immediate response was that of Goya:

"I don't think art has an effect on justice. Goya's *The Disasters of War*—I don't think they've stopped anything, that they've made *those people who make use of violence* more aware of it; they're an account of what happened but they change nothing."

In *Duelo*, through a motif of severed ears, Toledo demonstrates his perspective on the 'falling on deaf ears' plight of art and activism. Like the chilling possibility that the mystery of the students' disappearance will never be solved, the dismembered ears resonate the sharp disparity between the needs of the people and the blatant indifference of the state. One of the sculptures is a gruesome pile of ears in a basket; however, they are stacked neatly, almost achieving the angle of repose that paradoxically represents the settled state of an un-hearing government; in another, ears decorate the side of a plate, as bloody petals, or lace, their ubiquitous presence becoming benign ornaments of prettification. And, in yet another, swords are luxuriously crisscrossed on top of red velvet sand, the severed ears still stuck to the blades, the metal of the daggers stately replacing the heads that once listened there, resulting in a deafening, imperial coat of arms. Toledo's ears are ironically organized in aesthetic compositions of rest and normalization: the psychic violence of disassociation just is. I asked Toledo who his ideal viewer of *Duelo* and the *Carteles por Ayotzinapa* would be. Without hesitating he stated: "the politicians, the military, and the police" — the ones who make use of the violence, the ones who will never hear.

The international tour of *Carteles por Ayotzinapa* a.k.a *A Roar of Silence* first stopped in Los Angeles in February 2016. The exhibition was put on by four LA activist arts organizations. The mood of the tour is excited, hopeful, and one of the organizers declared the group's steadfast belief that "art ... is the most powerful social justice tool in the world." During my interviews with Francisco Toledo, I was particularly struck by that fact that a project he had initiated was not only being included in, but had also inspired an international art event focused on social justice and activism, when he is equally steadfast in his belief that art changes nothing and that it is never seen by the people it is meant for. Deborah Vankin's 2016 LA Times article on "A Roar of Silence," concluded with an exuberant statement by the director of the project, Carol A. Wells:

"A gun at your head can change how you act, but it can't change your heart Art — not just visual, but poetry and theater — has the ability to change your heart and your mind, to expand your consciousness. It's been central to every viable movement for social change throughout history. For protest, for education, for historical memory. And that's what this is about."

I asked Toledo to comment on this statement about the certainty of art promoting social change within which his work is being framed internationally. His response:

"These statements by Carol Wells are rather "bourgeois," but no ... a gun to your head—there's no heart involved when they point a gun at you, I mean it's all over and done with It's a nice sounding statement, but not very real."

Representative of the fear that the Mexican people live, Francisco Toledo's work operates at the epicenter of 'a gun at your head.'

The 43 student teachers of Ayotzinapa disappeared on September 26, 2014 and *Duelo* opened at the *Museo de Arte Moderno* on October 22, 2015. In a little over a year, the artist had produced one hundred and fifty ceramic sculptures. Toledo harkens from a generation of artists where the focus of the work is more inherently humanist and, as such, where heartbreak and tragedy are more on the forefront. In a contemporary art world where the concept is often prioritized over the craft and the actual production of the sculpture-based work is often contracted out to technicians, Toledo is a hands-on artist, a purist, who oversees every detail in the creation of his intricate ceramic sculptures. I wanted to confirm this level of creative, emotional and technical production and asked him exactly how long it took to complete the work. He responded: "It could have been a year, a year and three months, more or less. I never really calculated how much time I worked on this, but by the time I was finished, I was exhausted and sick." When I met Toledo, the main question on my mind was 'Why?'

Francisco Toledo and I met at Oaxaca City Library, one of the many cultural centers he has personally founded in the region. I left my most pressing question until the end:

You have talked about how "this work is a response to the fear, the anger you feel when you can't do anything, the impotence of not being able to do anything." Why do you do it if in your heart there is no hope and when you believe art affects nothing in terms of achieving social justice? Do you still have to do *something*—even if, paradoxically, in the long run, it means nothing? In short, why do you do it, especially when you are left 'exhausted and sick'?

The artist was aware of this possible contradiction. There was a pause in our discourse. He then responded: "Necedad, solo necedad." The English translation of the Spanish 'necedad' is a self-reflexive combination of both stubbornness and folly. Francisco Toledo, an artist devoted to both the craft and the heart, a relentless witness leaving behind raw truths in order to expose the hypocrisies of those who will never hear, and an artist who has unwaveringly created portrayals of human brutality from within a notoriously violent and corrupt country for decades, for no other reason than: no matter what.

Postscript

As a privileged member of the First World, I kept pushing for some hope, some comfort, some respite in *Duelo*, for the memories of the disappeared and undoubtedly murdered students, for the Mexican people, for the artist. Toledo is a lover of dogs, especially the Indigenous Xoloitzcuintli. There is a number of this traditional breed featured in the collection of sculptures. I asked him about his relationship with dogs and their role in the work.

"My relationship with dogs ... there's this book that also talks about dogs that lead people who have to cross a river, a river of blood, and the dog is your guide, the one who takes you to the other side. As a kid I heard this story, which is from the indigenous world, and of course it made an impression on me. And of course, you said to yourself that you mustn't beat dogs, because when you die, when you're at the river's edge, the dog won't want to lead you across. So you acquire that respect for them, because one of the dogs you've had will surely be the one that will lead you across the river."

KM: So the dogs in *Duelo* are almost like comforts, saviours, guides, like healing forces?

FT: No. They just lead you—to the dead. ¹⁹²