

## REVEALING THE IMAGE, REVEALING TRUTH

### Daniel Hernández-Salazar's visual memory of the genocide in Guatemala

**EXHIBITION** The modernity of the Angels. After Klee's painting, famous today because of Walter Benjamin's commentary rather than in itself, and after Wim Wender's *Wings of desire*, we now face this Angel that comes from Guatemala to raise awareness of the suffering of the Mayan people.

**D**uring Guatemala's 36-year Civil War (1960-1996), the military government engaged in a brutal "counterinsurgency" campaign against all forms of opposition. The rural Mayan population especially was singled out as the government accused them of siding with revolutionary armed groups. In the 1980s, the army and its paramilitary groups applied a "scorched earth" policy, resulting not only in the systematic assassination and relocation of indigenous communities, but also in the destruction of entire villages and sacred places. Guatemala's Truth Commission (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*) reported in 1999 that 83% of the 200,000 victims of the war were Mayan and concluded that the State violence against the Ixil Maya people amounted to "acts of genocide". A peace accord was signed in 1996, but this has not resulted in the construction of a collective and inclusive memory of the genocide in Guatemala, nor has it succeeded in providing justice for the victims. In May 2013 human rights organizations hailed the "historical" conviction of Efraín Ríos Montt, Chief of State at the height of the military campaign (1982-1983), for genocide and crimes against humanity. A few days later, however, the sentence was revoked by the Constitutional Court on procedural grounds.



© Annelien Spiessens

With his pictures of the exhumations and protests, photographer and human rights activist Daniel Hernández-Salazar brings the plight of the survivors and the victims' families into the public eye, endorsing their call for recognition and social justice. His picture depicting a mestizo angel with wings made from the scapulae bones of one of the nameless victims of the genocide has become an iconic image in Guatemala. The artist's work is currently on display at Kazerne Dossin.

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar, can you tell us about your professional background and how you came to be a photographer?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** Taking photographs has always been a passion for me. I started taking pictures from a very young age. Nevertheless, I decided to study

- 1956 / born
- 1974 / starts studying Architecture
- 1978 / starts his career in Fine Art Photography
- 1980s / works for several international news agencies (Reuters, AFP, Associated Press) and starts documenting the Civil War in Guatemala
- 1993 / receives a replica of the Nobel Peace Prize Medal from Rigoberta Menchú Tum
- 1998 / his polyptych *Esclarecimiento/Clarification* appears on the cover of *Guatemala: Never Again*, the final report of Bishop Juan José Gerardi's "Recovery of Historical Memory" project (REMHI)
- 1998 / is awarded the Jonathan Mann Humanitas Award for his artistic work on human rights issues
- 2004 / publishes his first anthology, *Guatemala, Memoria de un Ángel* (Kage Shobo)
- 2005 / is decorated and made Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Ministry of Culture and Communications of France
- 2007 / publishes *Para que todos lo sepan/ So That All Shall Know* (University of Texas Press)
- 2014 / presents two exhibitions in Belgium.

architecture, which actually influenced the way I think and perceive things – and the way I make photographs. There I learned about composition, light and colour. When a major earthquake shook Guatemala in 1976, I began working on the reconstruction of the cathedral of Guatemala City. I was hired as a draftsman to outline the reconstruction process but also began to take pictures of the project. That was the beginning of my career as a professional photographer. I continued studying architecture for several years while working as a photographer but eventually decided not to continue my studies and to focus on my photography instead.

**At what point in time did you make the transition from being an architectural photographer to a chronicler of Mayan culture and especially of the darker chapters of**

**Guatemalan history, namely the genocide and its effect on Guatemalan society?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** I have always been very sensitive and aware of the power of communication and of the role and influence media have on society. That became more clear when I started working as a photojournalist for newspapers in Guatemala, and later as a correspondent for press agencies. The period when I worked for Associated Press coincided with the last years of the war. Being a journalist at that time helped me to decide which direction I wanted to take with my work. I have always been attuned to social issues, but working with the press helped me focus the way I wanted to commit myself – and understand how to use photography as an instrument, as a tool to convey a certain message to make people aware of important events taking place. I understood the importance of leaving traces, graphic documents of what happened.

**The exhibition in Kazerne Dossin seems to be very different from the one in Galerie Verbeeck-Van Dyck in Antwerp when it comes to “documenting” the genocide.**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** Indeed, the exhibition in Kazerne Dossin focuses more on the photojournalistic documentary work I have done and continue to do. It reveals my interest in preserving what I would call a “visual memory” of the genocide. The exhibition in Antwerp shows another side of my work. I used a different method to create the pieces I presented at Galerie Verbeeck-Van Dyck to convey emotions and make them more personal. I cut the photos in pieces and afterwards reconstruct them with nails or scotch tape to represent rupture and pain. Another layer is added to the truth-value of the pictures, a more metaphorical and subjective one that refers to universal human themes like life, death or love, and transmits my artistic intention. During my career as a photographer, I have tried to combine both the need of communicating a message to the outside world and the need of expressing myself through my work. That is still true today, but I am more conscious of it now. I believe both approaches work, for me and for the public.

**How do you conceive of the role of art – of your art – in society? Should all art “work”?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** Well, I believe art has a specific function in society. Some people think art is just for fun or to decorate a house: “the painting or photograph should match the rug or the curtains”. I do not agree ●●●



© Daniel Hernández-Salazar - 2013

\_ The Traveler. Installation on public buses during the trial against Efraín Ríos Montt. Guatemala City, 23 May 2013.

- with that. Art for me is expression, freedom of expression, and commitment. Not necessarily commitment to social issues – there are indeed many forms of commitment – but commitment is a basic requirement for making art. If there is no commitment, there is no art.

In addition to being committed to something external, art also has to be committed to *itself*. By this I mean that the artist has to be conscious of the importance of creating his or her piece with great care and technical skill. For example, I use aesthetic criteria like the Golden Rule of proportions, the choice of the adequate light and the “Zone System” in black and white to produce a photograph. Even though I now work with digital cameras I still love the traditional dark room. I like to combine digital and analogue photography to make and develop my pictures.

**The poster of the exhibition shows your most famous picture, that of the angel calling out and drawing our attention. Can you tell us more about the genesis and role of this angelic figure that has become a symbol for the human rights struggle in Guatemala?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** First of all I want to say that in its origins, the angel is not a saint or a sacred being, but a messenger – that is the meaning of the Greek word *angelos*. I took the image of the angel from Christian tradition and started to transform it. Instead of a blond, white skinned, ethereal, nonsexual being, I gave him a more indigenous-mestizo look and photographed him naked in a very human, material way. The angel in my picture is a man of flesh and bone like the rest of us and is even a bit sensual. Conceptually I think the idea of the angel works very well because in Guatemala people are very religious and therefore familiar with religious iconography. Even if some of them are uneducated or illiterate, they grasp the concept of an angel.

They recognize that it is some kind of superior spiritual being that is trying to draw their attention. This is a key element that makes this image very powerful.

In Guatemala, this image of the angel is very much associated with Bishop Gerardi and his work for the Recovery of Historical Memory, and with the war. During the genocide trial of Ríos Montt in 2013, I did an installation or intervention in Guatemala City. A dozen public transport buses in the city carried big reproductions of the angel around. There was a difference with previous installations: this time above the picture of the angel there was a text: “*Si hubo genocidio*” (Yes, there was a genocide). The buses travelled in the streets, carrying the image throughout the city.

**The exhibition in Kazerne Dossin displays photos of these “interventions”. What is the effect of the Angel removed from its safe museum environment and planted in public space?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** Well, I feel that art galleries are in a sense very exclusive places. The number of people going to galleries is very limited and there are not a lot of people who have the means to buy a picture or a painting. Museums are a bit more inclusive, especially in a country like Belgium, but this is not the case in Guatemala. In my city, most people do not visit galleries or museums, and in the countryside the situation is even worse.

When Bishop Gerardi was killed [on 26 April 1998, two days after the publication of the memory recovery report (REHMI), I became aware of how the public space could be used to transmit a message. There was a big demonstration after the killing. People were carrying posters with the four angels I made for the cover of each one of the four books of the report. When I saw those images on the streets, I decided to use the street as a means of communication. At that moment I became aware public space is where the collective unconscious dwells. That unconscious floats in the streets; it is the place where you can really address a large audience.

These ideas had been brewing in my mind since I saw the work of two other artists. One is the Cuban artist Félix González-Torres, whose work I discovered at an exhibition in the Rufino Tamayo Museum in Mexico City. I really appreciated his suggestive and metaphorical images, his representations of absence. More interesting to me was the fact that his images were not only displayed in the museum but installed

in several public places in Mexico City, without any comment. In this way González-Torres created a very interesting dialogue between public and private space. Another artist who has worked a lot with public space is of course Christo. In his installations he places giant curtains in natural landscapes, or he wraps up entire buildings to communicate his ideas.

I think art can be very powerful when you can reach the masses. With this in mind, for the first commemoration of the assassination of Bishop Gerardi, I wanted to do something that would mark the occasion. I combined all these thoughts and influences and came up with the idea of placing the angel on big posters in symbolic places around the city.

**The locations were chosen very carefully?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** Yes, I chose these locations on three different criteria. First, there had to be a direct connection between the locations and Bishop Gerardi’s assassination, the perpetrators of this crime, and with the civil war in general. The second criterion was that the place should have large audiences passing in front of the angel, for instance a highway crossing, or a red light where cars would stop, or a place next to an important monument or landmark that had a special meaning for people in Guatemala. The third criterion was more personal and subjective: the place had to appeal to me. I think the locations that worked better were the ones which combined all three criteria. I selected thirty-five places and together with a team of friends from the Human Rights movement we set the installation up on the eve of the first anniversary of the killing of the Bishop. Then I kept taking pictures of the posters for some time in their environment, to see what happened to them and to study their interaction with the public space.

Afterwards I decided to install the Angel photo in public spaces abroad in order to put what happened in my country on the world map, with the intention of making people in other countries aware of it. In Europe there is very little knowledge of Guatemala’s war and genocide or culture. People are much more aware of the mass violence and forced disappearances in Chile and Argentina. I am not really sure why. Perhaps one of the reasons is that the United States was deeply involved in our history and supported the coup against the Jacobo Árbenz democratic regime, installing Carlos Castillo Armas as President in 1954. From that moment on, the USA continued to prop up the ●●●



© Daniel Hernández-Salazar - 2014

– Panoramic view of the exhibition.

- Guatemala's army for decades, training officers as well as providing technical assistance. Another reason, I think, is that the majority of the victims in Guatemala were "just" indigenous people. This of course brings us to the question of racism.

**Your Angel has now arrived in Belgium. We're standing on the fourth floor of Kazerne Dossin, where you present a selection of your documentary work. How did you conceptualize the exhibition's scenography?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** From the very start, I sought to integrate my exhibition into the style and atmosphere of the rest of the museum. I did not want to come and invade the space but instead engage in a dialogue. I was very aware of how I wanted the exhibition to look – I think this comes from my architectural background. I used existing elements, trying to harmonize the central volume of this exhibition with the building, so that it looks as if it had always been here. I think I succeeded and I am very happy with the result.

In terms of positioning the pictures, I tried to organize them into three concentric rings of information. On the outermost ring I presented the perpetrators, those who killed, massacred and persecuted the

people. It feels like they surround you, like they are set up in an ambush. The next ring represents civilian society and its struggle. I further divided this ring into four series of photographs to represent four narratives: the struggle for Human Rights, the desperate search for relatives, the process of mourning, and the search for justice. To represent this last theme I used pictures of the Ríos Montt genocide trial. Finally the central ring is a place of pain and suffering. So the three rings represent different moments of the same subject, of the same society.

**Why was the inner space designed as a "black box"?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** I imagined it as a covered space, a kind of box or shrine, where I would display the most tragic photos. To avoid sensationalism, I presented them in an intimate space where people would meditate on the magnitude of the genocide. I wanted this inner space to have a roof in order to give it a reserved aspect, like a grave or a sanctuary. When I was imagining the exhibition, I always referred to this room as "the Shrine". When they enter the inner space, most people automatically start to move silently and start speaking in hushed tones. On the outside they



Pictures © Daniel Hernández-Salazar

– Former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt listens to the debate of his trial, 9 April 2013.



– Clash of Two Worlds, 1492-1992. A Group of *campesinos*, demanding land to work and live in, are confronted by the National Police in downtown Guatemala City, 21 July 1992.



– Rigoberta Menchu Tum kisses the remains of a person found in a clandestine grave. Xiquín Sanahí, Comalapa, Guatemala. 5 March 2002.

talk freely, but in there they use soft voices. I tried to enhance the feeling of being in a special place by using only black and white for the photographs. It creates a more solemn atmosphere here.

**When entering the exhibition room, we see an enormous photo of a luscious Guatemalan landscape (on the bottom left). It is a beautiful scenery, but a very complex and layered picture as well.**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** I decided to hang that image there because I wanted people to know what Guatemala looks like. Guatemala is really a beautiful place, the countryside is marvellous. The lake in this picture,



© Daniel Hernández-Salazar - 2014

Lake Atitlán, is on an old volcanic caldera. We say it is the most beautiful in the world and perhaps this is a bit presumptuous (*smiles*). The longest distance across the lake is 19 kilometres, which gives you an idea of its size. It is a magnificent place. That picture and others is a way for me to show the natural and cultural richness of Guatemala, instead of merely focusing on the political side – the violence, the military and the demonstrations. In other pictures, you can see the country's identity: people wearing traditional clothes and handcrafted bags with an embroidered quetzal, the national bird.

However, the Atitlán picture contains many different layers because this beautiful place has been the setting of enormous tragedies. Tragedies that marked the landscape, tragedies that are literally buried underneath. On the photo next to the lake you can see the place where I went to photograph several exhumations. When tourists look at such idyllic landscapes, they do not realize many people were killed and buried there in mass graves.

All the pictures in this exhibition have been selected using very strict criteria to address specific issues. For example in this picture (*next page, upper left*) you can see the parish church of Chichicastenango, a very famous indigenous village. At first glance it looks like a photo of a simple tourist attraction. You see the church where traditional ceremonies are held, people in traditional clothing and a Mayan priest. But in fact ●●●

– Lake Atitlán.



© Anneleen Spiessens

– Daniel Hernández-Salazar commenting his picture of the Chichicastenanga church.

- what you are looking at is a burial ceremony of victims of the war. People are carrying coffins containing the remains of dozens of people who were assassinated. The image of this church has been used by the Guatemalan Tourist Commission for decades to promote the country – to “sell” it without any preoccupation or engagement with the people we see in the image. I chose this photo because everything comes together: the Mayan ceremony, the burial of the people who were killed in the war, the Guatemalan culture, the historical architectural background and the opportunistic “perfect image” for tourism consumption.

**Many photos in this exhibition show exhumations. Do these exhumations symbolically mirror your documentary work, as a kind of *mise en abyme*? Is it your aim to uncover what is hidden?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** In fact, two years ago I held an exhibition called “Revelation: The Power of Memory in the Land of Oblivion”. I used the word “revelation” because in Spanish, “to reveal” (*revelar*), can have two meanings: to unveil something so people can see something that was hidden before, and also “to develop”. In Spanish we say you “reveal” a photo when you develop it. So by using that as title for the exhibition I was referring to both ideas: the revelation of the truth and the revelation of the image.

This is what I do: I “reveal” things. It is my purpose to leave a visual memory of the time in which I lived

and of the events I witnessed. Of things I believe are not right. I hope that my photos can serve as a reference for the next generations and can encourage young people to review and change the way the society is organized.

**Why is it important to you to exhibit your work here?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** First of all, Kazerne Dossin is a big museum and a lot of people come here. Here I can address the masses. But what is even more important is that it is not just any museum – it is a museum that has the very specific purpose of remembering the Jewish genocide which is, of all the genocides throughout world history, the most “famous”. But this museum also broadens the subject to other genocides and human rights issues, for example in Rwanda or Guatemala. Displaying my pictures in this museum provides them authentication, a validation and recognition from Belgian society. This will make the Guatemalan tragedy known in Belgium and Europe, and at the same time it will have a major impact in my country.

You know, even though we suffered from all that violence, we sometimes do not realize how bad it really was – and is. When you have been experiencing it as a routine in your daily life, you actually end up thinking violence is normal. Every day in Guatemala people are being killed, women are raped and bus drivers murdered. We have been living in violence since the Spanish conquest and beyond. Now our war, our massacres represented through my photos are here in this museum connected to the Holocaust and Auschwitz – events that many people in Guatemala recognize as something horrible because they have seen movies about it. Perhaps after this exhibition the murder of indigenous people, students and intellectuals during the Civil War in Guatemala, their tragedy and their suffering, will be recognized by Guatemalans as something similarly terrible. This is essential to me.

**You refer to the trivialization of violence in Guatemala, still today. What are your hopes for your country?**

**Daniel Hernández-Salazar:** I do not want to be pessimistic, but I do not think that during my lifetime I will see a real change in Guatemala. This does not mean that I will stop struggling of course, but I think we have missed out on so many opportunities for change. The presidencies of Juan José Arévalo Bermejo and Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán from 1945 to 1954 were real opportunities for Guatemala to become a truly democratic country. But in 1954 the President was ousted by a



© Daniel Hernandez-Salazar - 2012

– Humanity repeating its tragedies. Action wearing a T-shirt with Guatemala's memory Angel at the door of Auschwitz I concentration camp. Oświęcim, Poland, 2 June 2010.

coup, which was followed by a period of dictatorship, military rule and corruption that never really ended. In 2013, with the trial of Ríos Montt, we had another opportunity to redirect our future. If that trial had been successful, our country would have engaged in a new path, and other people would have been brought to justice as well. But many people feel that oligarchs and ex-military that were involved in the genocide put pressure on the constitutional court to reverse the verdict, thus crushing all hope for change.

In Guatemala we have a certain system in place, on which the wealthy classes depend heavily. They systematically block any attempt to transform society. I think this unwillingness to embrace change comes from their insecurity and personal spiritual weakness. Those people want to preserve the old model of own-

ing large estates and having modern day slaves – poor people whose produce they buy at very low prices. They wish to keep the middle class population ignorant and obedient, so they would never dare to challenge their position. Guatemala keeps going backwards. From the outside, the country looks like a sick person who does not want to be cured. People in Guatemala are losing hope. They are walking dead, they stopped dreaming. This is why I am so pessimistic about the future. I hope change will come, but in my heart I do not really believe it will come anytime soon. ■

Anneleen Spiessens & Janiv Stamberger

→ *Learn more*

◆ *Memento Vitae/Memento Mori* at Galerie Verbeeck-Van Dyck (Antwerpen, September-October 2014)

◆ *Genocide Dismissed. The Silenced Tragedy of Guatemala* in Kazerne Dossin (Mechelen, 29 September 2014 - 22 March 2015)