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In Search of Place

by

Aleida R. Hertel

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in

Saint Louis, in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts

Thesis Advisor

Monika Weiss

Primary Advisors

Lisa Bulawsky

Richard Krueger

Committee Members

Ila Sheren

Monika Weiss

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Open Awareness	4
Her Memory is Absent.....	9
Intuition and Affect.....	14
A Hand-Built Home	18
Practicing Empathy.....	24
Frontera.....	30
Welcome to Third Grade	34
Conclusion	40
Endnotes.....	41
Bibliography.....	44
Illustrations.....	47

Introduction

My art investigates the Other, that is, the being outside of me. My work comprises sculpture, drawing, installation, video, sound, and – as of most recently – publicly engaged projects. Impacted by current events as well as by personal and global history of displacement, I investigate poetic, political and emotional territories of *Otherness*, yet at the same time, through my work I want to imply a sense and a possibility of togetherness.

This text has been conceived as a collage of thoughts that derive equally from my studio practice, my life experience and from responding to diverse voices in the fields of contemporary art, poetry, philosophy and theory, with special attention to poetic voices that are marked by trauma such as the poetry of Octavio Paz and the art of Doris Salcedo.

This text includes memories of my personal story of displacement, by introducing my artworks such as *1975: One Home Remembered by Six Children*, 2018, (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) that explore the memory of a family faced with trauma. I will also introduce my first experimental film project; as well as one project that I created reflecting on soldiers and the casualties of war. Further, a work based on a chain-link fence will be explored, concerned with the boundaries, borders and confinement imposed in the lives of many. With it, I will introduce my research at the US-Mexico border where I was able to learn of lives intertwined in Tijuana, a border city that opens doors to migrants and deported individuals, every day.

My writing will travel through the vague memory of my childhood, a memory affected by the constant experience of changing homes, schools, cities and states within Mexico as a child, and later as an adult, living around the world. That vague memory continues to inform my work to this day. Among most recent projects, I will focus on one in which a growing number of clay boots, will articulate the elements that represent the personal and the universal, inviting the viewer to consider the dualities that every person experiences individually, as well as collectively, and how those nuances shape identity, sameness and its opposite, *Otherness*.

At present moment, my writing and art making have been forced and at the same time, privileged by the unexpected global pandemic. This extraordinary crisis has proven to be instrumental in my current art-making process. My confinement has become strategic as it allowed me to observe what is important: abolishing Otherness.

In philosophy of ethics, such as the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,¹ the Other signifies the one who is marginalized, oppressed, killed in wars, colored, non-white, gendered, a racial minority, a migrant, a refugee, underprivileged, differently abled and more. Currently, this mutually shared alterity in the global landscape is not a human enemy, rather a virus that does not know distinctions nor borders, while taking the biggest toll on Others as defined above. It is my hope that the stories ahead will convey the need for a more empathetic society, perhaps with the help of *art*.

Open Awareness

When I was a child, I witnessed the movement of a white curtain flying mid-air in a quiet, peaceful motion, although the moment of the movement of the curtain coincided with terrible news for my family. At that very moment, the movement of the curtain remained a vision of comfort, still fresh in my mind today. The consistent swaying of the white curtain's flow assured me that everything would be fine. I was only five years old and our family was faced with loss and immediate displacement.

Today as an adult, I qualify that moment as one of *open awareness*, which I have learned through meditation. During the time it occurred, there was peace and there was loss, reassurance and fear, doubt and certainty. All of these dualities were simultaneous and too heavy for a child to handle. Today I see those early experiences as a gift of clarity and a view into the self that I did not understand at the time. The memory of that curtain remains in my mind as a dream and as a grounding object that offers proof my childhood house ever existed. Gaston Bachelard gives me reassurance about the meaning of keeping this memory as present today, as I am able to:

If we have retained an element of dream in our memories, if we have gone beyond merely assembling exact recollections, bit by bit the house that was lost in the mists of time will appear from out the shadow.²

Reading poetic and theoretical texts provides comfort and support for the work I create in my studio and beyond. Octavio Paz offers a voice of wisdom, a voice of pragmatism and observation. In his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz beautifully describes the many moments in an individual's life that are marked by a state of passage from one developmental stage of personal awareness to the next. Paz's book describes a perspective on the self that does not focus on the

individual's origin. In explaining the dialectic of solitude, Paz writes:

Solitude is the profoundest fact of the human condition. Man is the only being who knows he is alone, and the only one who seeks out another. His nature (...) consists in his longing to realize himself in another. Man is nostalgia and a search for communion. Therefore, when he is aware of himself, he is aware of his lack of another, that is, of his solitude".³

(...) The child uses the magic power of language or gesture, symbol or act, to create a living world in which objects are capable of replying to his questions. (...) through magic the child creates a world in his own image and thus resolves his solitude. Self-awareness begins when we doubt the efficacy of our instruments".⁴

Through my work, I continue to search for communication and connection with others. By experiencing and reflecting on those interactions I am able to conceive my work as always existing in relationship and dialogue with the world. Ultimately our identity is shaped by mutual interaction. My work is predicated on the understanding of my own individuality and the identity of the Other, thus on mutual connection and exchange. The entries that follow will describe memories of my past and the descriptions of my artworks and art making process, which I consider the present.

My experimental film, *One Spring Day*, 2019, (00:02:48, video, color, sound), evokes the moment I described above, of witnessing a white, long curtain moved by the wind coming from the ocean near a house in Southern Mexico. In the film the slow movement is centered within the image. The gentle sounds of movement of the cloth highlight the emptiness of the room and are supported by the echoing sounds. At the end of the film a rocking chair appears, standing silently. It's the only other object described in the film. The chair, that has been a source of inspiration for this work, is also the only object that still remains in my family. *One Spring Day* (Fig. 3) conveys

peaceful atmosphere but also vulnerability. Using very few elements that habitually belong to domestic space, the focus of the work is the emptiness itself, and its sound, that is timed to synchronize with the viewer's breath.

Preparing the space for filming, I marked the floor of the room with thick, white tape dividing the space as I remembered the room from my childhood. I marked the space for the main door of the home and left some space to imply the positions of the windows (as well as I could remember), and where the curtain would hang from. Although I never returned to that home again, I recall the shape of the building itself, and its scale although it is always a foggy memory. Somehow, I can still point to the main door with my left hand and to the window, with my right hand. The recollection of the architecture of the home is vague. I turn back to Gaston Bachelard and his book *The Poetics of Space*, where he describes the complexity of memory in relation to a space, particularly in relation to home:

(...) Beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us.

(...) The house entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands. It is a group of organic habits. [...] We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations of a fundamental theme.⁵

The memory of the white curtain marks a space and site in time. Before *it*, I remember only a few things; after *it*, things in my ability to remember became clearer. Perhaps this liminal quality of the memory is why I am attached to it. *One Spring Day* is an evocation of solitude and the sudden feeling of disconnection that I experienced as a child. The work provides the viewer with the opportunity to experience a moment of *open awareness*⁶, its affect relates to the strange

environments Octavio Paz refers to in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* as potential links to normalcy and a safety that can come from a moment of fear, especially when passing from one threshold to the next in human development, particularly in the face of a traumatic experience:

Each of these phases is an attempt to transcend our solitude and is followed by an immersion in strange environments. The child must face an irreducible reality, and at first, he responds to its stimuli with tears of silence (...) The cord that united him with his life has been broken, and he tries to restore by means of play and affection.⁷

Her Memory is Absent

Recovering from her brother's sudden death was not easy for our mother. She never recovered from the pain of losing him, although she tried to overcome her grief. One day my mother lost her memory. She could not recognize me, nor my siblings. We were sent halfway across the country to live with relatives while our mother received medical attention. I often reflect with sadness about the fact that she lost her memory for a good part of my childhood before her death. To us she was our mother, but temporarily she did not know we existed. Were we still her children if she did not know who we were? Eventually we returned home to join her. We eventually accepted that she was never able to overcome the longing for her lost brother.

Over the years, my siblings and I have depended on each other's ability to remember the past, in order to reconstruct the memory of our last home, together. In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart addresses nostalgia as a "social disease (...) which arises by the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction where the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative."⁸ The discussion of nostalgia is relevant for my practice as an artist in general, but also specifically as a context for a project, *1975: One Home Remembered by Six Children*, in which I incorporated traces of collective memory of my family. In that work I wanted to pay homage to our mother and to the importance of remembering and memory as such. In his book *In Search of Memory*, Eric Kandel writes how "memory is important, without it we are nothing".⁹ I began working on the project with the ambitious intention to collect memories that would unite our family and give the younger siblings a grounding sense of identity, which was lost when we all separated. At the start of the

project I had only a few photographs of our family and no existing images of the home. It was important to collect as many pieces of information as possible. I collected written lists of memories from my five siblings and learned what each remembered about our mother. All of those lists were helpful to the younger siblings. It became a meaningful project not only as a work of art but also as a work of human connection.

1975: One Home Remembered by Six Children is an installation comprising six miniature house models created from the drawings provided by my five siblings as well as my own drawing. Each of the miniature houses is built from ceramic substrates and encased in a Plexiglas structure. Total dimension was approximately 60” wide, displayed on a custom-made white table. I asked each of my siblings to make a drawing of our childhood home, as detailed as they could. The requested drawings were sent to me privately in order to avoid influencing each other’s memories. The last time we lived in that house had been over four decades ago. As child number five, I was anxious to compare what I remembered, as little as I did. My memory of the home only contained the kitchen, the living room and the location of an electrical plug, where my baby brother stuck a key and hurt himself, clearly that memory created a lasting impression.

My four older siblings, who at the time of living in the house ranged in ages between 14 and 7, drew very detailed drawings and most of them coincided accurately enough. I used their diagrams to create individual three-dimensional representations, eight inches in height each. I aligned the house models from left to right, placing them on a narrow white table built for this installation. The display demonstrates the gradual decrease in memory based on the age of the children. The accuracy of the detail that each sibling provided, differed as based on the personality of each child and based on what objects they considered important. The memory was not

necessarily based on their age, nor what they could retain in their memory. In fact, the oldest sibling (fourteen at the time) only remembered basic squares and rectangular spaces, but my brother who was seven at the time recalled instead many details, down to the location of the items that belonged to other siblings.

Aside from miniaturized walls and spaces for entries, all built in white material, each model has the family's rocking chair we still own today, which appears in some of my work as a symbol of the past. The four older children remembered the same location where the rocking chair used to be in the house. The two younger siblings were too young to remember objects other than the rocking chair. For me, the memory of the building itself is almost entirely gone, and most of my recollections relating to the home are based on its affect. I remember helping my mother make a green cake; my brother screaming after sticking the key into the plug; and sadly, the episode of me accidentally killing my pet chicken while slamming a door.

1975: One Home is a project about collective visual representation of our family home as a physical and cognitive space. Bachelard calls these primitive images of our home “centers of fixations for recollections left in our memories”.¹⁰ By using limited visual clues *1975: One Home Remembered by Six Children* provides the viewer a representation of the elusiveness of memory and the challenges of building a collective family memory, and by extension, collective history. Susan Stewart offers a perspective on time and memory, which I found fitting in the context of this project and the boundaries that our mind is unable to transcend:

The miniature is a world of arrested time; its stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. And this effect is reciprocal, for once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us.”¹¹

The off-white, monochromatic choice for the house models is representative of the visual memory I have when I attempt to remember our home. It is as though the house is veiled in a white membrane impossible to transcend. I do not remember the home of my childhood from the age of one to four with clarity, however, I do remember playing with dirt and improvised tools, or laying on the cool tile floor, those memories are alive in my mind, and they constantly return while I make work today. My project allows the viewer to immerse themselves within the world of miniature representation that conveys a sense of timelessness, which is also an affect described here by Bachelard:

Images that insist and force us to remember farther back into our past, we shall have to take lessons from poets. For how forcefully they prove to us that the houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us; that they insist in us in order to live again, as though they expected us to give them a supplement of living.¹²

Intuition and Affect

Attending a Montessori school, in Southern Mexico in the early 1970s, allowed me to play outside in nature on a daily basis. My space of choice was often the chicken coop filling up buckets of dirt and collecting rocks. Every day, the children got an opportunity to feed several animals and walk a pet donkey around the yard. The school was also a hospital for dolls and broken toys. At the back of the school the main room of the doll hospital was dark and dusty, with tools, wigs, doll shoes and rolls of fabrics that filled the shelves. Limbs and torsos with tags identifying each doll with their owner's names continually piled in drawers and cabinets. At the time donating a doll was out of the question in Mexico, dolls and toys were always handed down from child to child.

I remember our weekly visits to the repair room where the collections of mismatching body parts and countless broken toys were stored. I enjoyed our daily running in-and-out of that cluttered space. We loved following the transformation of the dolls after they were fixed. "Things that seem to happen suddenly arise from deep roots in the past or from long dormant seeds".¹³ Indeed, I find the seeds of the work I make today, deeply connected in the memories from my past. As if those seeds, from the dusty shelves of my unconscious, were waiting to be part of a creative exchange.

My installation *Back Home*, 2018, (fabric, fiber and clay, 57x52 in.) is built of white, light fabric covered in wet clay. It leans on the wall, resting, drying, and shedding specks of dust as one walk by. The particles of dust are timekeepers, worth catching on my daily observation, sometimes aided by the air moving in space. When I move close to the work, I find crevasses and folds and spend time following the lines of the threads and the darkness of the layers of clay.

While working on *Back Home* (Fig. 4) I relied on intuition and *listened* to the materials. I hand-stitched the eight to ten yards of white muslin that I purchased at a government surplus store. I had fifty dollars to spend, worth the visit, pacing around the hallways of such an extraordinary place, where remnants of war are up for sale. I wanted silence in the room, time to take it all in. I found the small objects in the store fascinating, the narrow gauze by the boxfuls, the cooking utensils, the screws and nails rusted in heavy metal containers, the hundreds of boxes with white labels and stickers, printers and rolls of paper. War requires a classification, organization and execution. I wanted to purchase an object that resonated with my memories and that reflected the journey of the many soldiers that leave, travel, fight, serve and if they are fortunate, return. How many objects are flown around the world to aid fighting with or in another country, and how many of those objects are essential for the service men and women in order to take up the task to both destroy and survive?

These ten yards of cloth returned from war, unused but still usable, asking for transformation. Once back in my studio I applied wet clay to the cloth, applying it with delicate gestures. This slow and gradual build-up of clay reminded me of wounds and raw skin, of the heaviness of body. I thought of those who fight and leave their families, and the emotional and physical residue that war leaves behind. The trauma of losing the life of someone is enough to feel empathy towards those who selflessly risk losing their lives during war. *Back Home* is a work that responds to the traumatic residue, something I imagine soldiers are forced to face long after their deployment. The juxtaposition of soft and hard materials in the making of this piece evoke the vulnerability of human life, albeit only through the poetry of the piece.

The work of the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo inspires me to approach my practice by

making work that establishes a dialogue with the viewers, especially when we as artists cannot solve the trauma of war or human displacement. Salcedo's piece *La Casa Viuda*¹⁴ is a good example of the silent and powerful message Salcedo delivers to the viewer by representing the absence of the humans she depicts, and thus demanding the collective responsibility. (Fig. 5,6)

While making *Back Home*, every morning I would observe the latest overnight increase of dust on the floor below it. The ritual of observing the residue of dust in my studio, reminded me Anselm Kiefer's mentioning in an interview that "no atom is ever lost." I think of the particles that make a body. In this case, the particles seem to be shed by the changing body of the work itself. The particles, however minute, make me think of the loss and struggle experienced by so many today, soldiers, migrants, refugees. The piece continues to lean on the wall, like a soldier at rest. This installation is an evocation of a filter, the polluted filter of society, where the particles symbolize people, soldiers, fighters, some of them are still part of the body and some of them are shed. I leave room for a positive reflection: the bigger the pile of dust on the floor, the lighter the cloth becomes. This work conveys empathy towards the soldiers and veterans, where the trauma of war remains.

A Hand-built Home

My paternal grandmother was born in 1900, in the state of San Luis Potosi in northern Mexico. I always loved to know her year of birth because I could always keep track of her age. She was 70 years older than me, and 35 years older than my Dad. She was born in the years leading up to the Mexican revolutionary war and she made sure we all knew names of generals and battles that were fought right in her backyard before she turned ten years old. My grandmother loved numbers, like I do, and although she only went to part of primary school, she was a fantastic businesswoman and community leader. She could cook well and would organize projects for her church —and was even able to raise a fourth child who was abandoned at her front door. She was a single mother and an orphan herself.

My grandmother's home was a laboratory of experimentation for her grandchildren. We helped her collect fruit in the yard that she would donate to neighbors and the church congregation. The home where she lived was partly finished by hand. She was very disciplined touching up walls with a mixture of material that only she knew how to make. She always said she did not have a recipe and we could only learn to make it by helping her in the process. All I remember is the terrible smell of the mixture. I can still recall her singing and the humming sounds she made as she smoothed out the surfaces of the walls and floors of her dining room at the back of the home. The inside of the house did not have a tile on the floor, instead she would smooth the dirt floors by hand, and overtime, she flattened the floors into a beautiful shiny finish, in which she took pride. Abue, as we called her, died at the age of 86 when I was 16.

As I continue to reflect on the works that I have created during last two years, I think of

women who throughout history have had to fight for a place in history. In the next project described in this text, I invite the viewer to consider the social changes that took place in a space of about one hundred years, between the birth of my grandmother in Mexico and the Guatemalan girl who is the subject of my most recent work. Both the girl and my grandmother were minorities who inspired my project *Earth Portraits*.

Earth Portraits, 2019, (three pieces, 32"x32" each, soil on Plexiglas), is a series of works inspired by my research regarding Jakelin Caal Maquin, an eight-year-old Guatemalan migrant girl who died during her detention at the US-Mexico border in 2018. Before Jakelin even arrived at the Texas port of entry to the United States, she had been neglected many times. In her village Raxruha¹⁵, Guatemala, where she was born, indigenous families like hers suffer discrimination. Her parents are not fluent in Spanish. Their entire village was mostly displaced due to drought; her journey to the USA was with her father, and her mother and three siblings stayed behind. The smuggler that helped them cross the border charged them seven thousand dollars, a fortune for a family from rural Guatemala. I read that Jakelin had never owned a pair of shoes until her father bought her a pair of pink sneakers in order to travel to the United States. Jakelin and her father reportedly were denied water for over eight hours while having a temperature of 105.7 as they applied for asylum at the border. She died under the supervision of the US government at hospital in El Paso, TX, in December 2018.

The soil crusted onto the Plexiglas surface conveys hostility and material opposition. These silhouettes are intentionally missing definition in their eyes, ears and mouths. Conceptually I try to convey the inability for Jakelin to communicate, hear, or see, during her traumatic experience at the border. While I consider these *Earth Portraits* (Fig. 7) to be a memorial for a child, it is also a

protest against the Zero Tolerance Policy¹⁶ that affects the lives of many who attempt to cross the US- Mexico border. The clay applied, as I traced the face of Jakelin, is mixed with ground coffee and black beans. I was inspired by the agricultural challenges her village had to face, and the reason why she and her father had to migrate to the United States.

The texture of the portraits is changing every day, the cracks and flakes of the soil mixture¹⁷ are becoming more brittle as the moisture dries. While making them I leaned on the surface covering it with a piece of canvas, and rubbing the eyes and the mouth, rendering her face private and anonymous, but also blind and unable to speak, unable to see their fate and their future. The residue that detaches from the work, as time goes by, will fall and transcend the border that Jakelin could not.

As I sit at my home studio uncertainty lies ahead for me, my community, the United States, and the world. We are beginning to see the start of a health COVID-19 pandemic and yes, the future seems dark, and that darkness keeps us from seeing what is to come. The world now can experience the interconnectedness with farmers in Guatemala, Mexico and other countries, who still today continue to work shoulder to shoulder, (no social distancing in the fields), in order to save the fields that keep North Americans fed. In her article *Trump is Emancipating Unbridled Hatred* (October 10, 2016) Judith Butler discusses the moral responsibilities toward the Other. She specifically points to the person-to-person moral obligation, particularly when the livelihood of a people is being compromised by political issues and also by climate change and food distribution:

Global interdependence, includes consideration of climate change and food distribution, I think those of us who live in first world situations, (...) enjoy our

freedom and our relative safety from direct violence, but [...] others are made to suffer¹⁸.

Today, more than even a few months ago, we see how significantly connected we are to people around the world. I assume our current global indefinite period of isolation will continue to inspire artistic intervention, that inspires me daily as an artist.

Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar works by intervening with poetic device. In his piece *Geometry of Conscience* (Fig. 8), 2010¹⁹ he addresses human casualties suffered during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile from 1973-1990. This piece displays the silhouette of 500 victims by lighting the back of them in a mirrored room, giving it the effect of infinity to such a traumatic event. One more piece by Jaar is *The Silence of Nduwayezu*, 1997, (Fig. 9) a single slide/photograph was printed one million times. Jaar wanted to “reduce the scale of the tragedy to a single human being”²⁰. Jaar met the family of the individual in the photograph, he considered it important for the loss of one million lives to be represented by one person and displayed the enormous pile of photographs on a light table.

Similarly, my work in *Earth Portraits*, focuses in one child, one girl, a brown girl, an indigenous girl, a vulnerable girl, a deserving girl: Jakelin. I made this work to represent the thousands of children displaced, imprisoned, often tortured, and separated from their parents today. After Jaar, I believe that choosing the one child to bring to the attention of the viewer all others, might convey the repetitiveness of this unresolved immigration crisis.

Note: I would have liked to honor the memory of Jakelin in a proper way, perhaps displaying her photograph in my work, –unfortunately I was not able to contact her lawyers representing her case in the United States, despite several attempts²¹.

Practicing Empathy

During the Fall of 2019 I slept on cardboard boxes on the unfinished floor of my home's basement. I slept with the lights on, fully dressed, shoes on, and covered my body with mylar blankets, the same blankets migrants are given at ICE detention centers at the border. The first night my hips hurt, and my neck felt stiff. Over a period of three weeks I spent fifty-six hours sleeping downstairs. My own home seemed a new place. I did not recognize the sounds heard from the bare concrete floors in the basement; the creaking of the structure of the home were all new to me, especially while sleeping with the lights on. My house suddenly felt like a foreign space. The experience gave me a different perspective on my own comfort, and the discomfort others experience as well as my freedom to choose when to leave the basement. I was able to reflect on freedom and privilege. How can others be sleeping in those conditions in detention centers and I am able to walk away when choosing to?

Fall of 2019 was full of anticipation. Since my research on individuals detained at the border, from afar, did not seem enough, I wanted to visit the border and experience Tijuana from an artistic perspective, beyond the tourist I had been in the past. In January of 2020, my trip to the border finally became possible. I shadowed a human rights lawyer, Darinka Carballo. Her agency services mainly individuals from Mexico, Central America and Haiti, as well deported individuals from the U.S. Her agency assists in the repatriation process of those deported and arriving from the United States. Darinka Carballo was very generous and candid in explaining a typical day in Tijuana, a city which she refers to as "un caldo," a soup that contains a diversity of lives and nationalities, temporarily coexisting in Tijuana. On any given day, she may be assisting children

and adults who have no money, documentation, nor passports; representing young women who are victims of human trafficking; and finding ways to collect donations of food, clothing and other essential supplies.

I was able to visit two shelters in Tijuana, one dedicated entirely to men and a second one to women. We delivered food and personal hygiene items and were invited to stay and talk to the migrants for a short amount of time, before they were called to dinner. All of the migrants at the shelters were Central Americans, all in their mid-to-late twenties traveling with no minors.

Darinka said the Central American migrants in Tijuana try to hide their identity, many of them reject to physically appear Mexican but at the same time they want to show their identity and their foreigner status. Octavio Paz notes that young Mexicans, arriving in Los Angeles had a similar attitude in the 50s, each of the migrants being conflicted about their identity: “(...) his salvation depends on his becoming part of the society he appears to deny.”²²

Tijuana functions mostly, by the active support of volunteer-run civil organizations like Darinka's. Religious institutions are the most involved in the assistance to the *población flotante*, the floating population of Tijuana. The most critical area of the city, in terms of displaced individuals, is an area called El Bordo, a canal that connects with the public sewage system that extends for miles where migrants settle in hope to live there on a temporary basis. Darinka could not take me to that location; a visit there needs to be arranged in advance. The individuals living there are extremely wary of visitors; in the past, migrants have been poisoned and attacked thus they prefer to be left isolated within this area of the city. We drove near El Bordo (slang for “the border”) and could see from the freeway people living in ditches, washing clothes and taking showers, injecting themselves, sharing food and looking through trash cans nearby. Most of the

people living there are men, many speak fluent English, largely consuming meth and heroin, they live in cardboard and wood shelters colloquially named “*ñongos*” that the government burns periodically in order to discourage habitation in those conditions. I naively thought of taking *tamales* to the migrants and were told not to do so, in fact they said, El Bordo is a dangerous place in Tijuana. During my visit to Tijuana I thought of Jacques Derrida’s words, in his book *Of Hospitality* “not all arrivals are received as guests”²³, Derrida deconstructs the linguistics of being hostile and hospitable; both words which are closely related by their root.

The rest of the city seemed fairly affluent, organized and friendly. A large population of Haitians, since the devastating earthquake in 2010, became permanent in Tijuana, they fled their country and now are able to attend school for free and apply for legal residency and work permits. A migrant in Tijuana can work legally upon arrival, they earn enough money and after two months they may be able to move into rooms that cost about forty dollars per month. Many newly arrived Central Americans are building shelters on borrowed land where migrants can live on a low budget (about \$2 USD per day) with shared facilities like kitchens and bathrooms. The general notion in Tijuana is that it is important to participate in assisting the floating population and by doing so, prevent homelessness and crime in the city. To paraphrase Emmanuel Levinas, the population is being recalled to a responsibility toward the Other: “(...) I always have the capacity to consent to what I submit to and to put a good face on a bad situation”.²⁴ I had a sense of shame while witnessing the living conditions of so many.

During my research trip I also visited Playas de Tijuana, (Fig. 10) a park on the beach filled with restaurants and souvenir stores. The beach is divided by the border wall, which is partially painted with colorful designs by professional and amateur artists. A large portion of the

wall is dedicated to a mural displaying the names of undocumented military service members that died at war on behalf of the United States but were not granted legal citizenship. I spent a few hours in Playas conversing with locals, tourists and vendors. What I witnessed while being there is, according to the locals, a daily cyclical repetition: people attempt to cross, the US Border Patrol guards arrest them, and they are immediately sent back to Mexican soil. I met a young man who was preparing to sneak through the border structure by only wearing shorts; it was about 50F degrees. He said he was nervous and very cold, but that he was prepared to run about three miles to the closest place in the City of San Diego to hopefully reunite with relatives. Our conversation happened while the CBP guards were taunting young Mexicans by pacing back and forth on the sand along the American side. I observed the irony that, on one side of the border one young man is nervously planning to cross the barrier, while two officers nonchalantly play motorcycle tricks on the California beach.

The time spent with the people at the border, although brief, offered me a perspective into the lives of many. By that time, I returned from Tijuana, the ICE detention centers were in the news daily, many families were detained and separated from their children, while awaiting the resolution of their asylum process.

The piece, *A Room Nobody Wants for Themselves*, 2019, (Fig. 11) hangs on the wall of my studio, heavy with about forty pounds of clay that was applied to the chain-link metal fence. The clay mixed with fibers dried into organic shapes, in places where my fingers touched and pressed onto the structure of this 10'x6' fence. From a few feet away the clay began to look like a landscape. If you look closely the shape of the landscape also looks like crowds of people walking at a distance. The clay applied onto the fence challenges the viewer to discover the

source of the material and implicates them through the physical proximity to the work. I searched for ambiguity of the source of the material. I wanted the person viewing the work to ask: is it mud, dirt, soil or human feces?

I began working on this piece when I learned that a young Mexican American man was detained by ICE in Texas, for twenty-three days without being allowed to shower. During those twenty-three days he attempted to prove his American citizenship. He was eventually legally represented, and later released as he proved being an American-born citizen²⁵. The idea that someone can be forced, and tortured, by relinquishing the most basic of needs, like a bar of soap, and water, was my first inspiration for this work. This work confronts the absurdity of the situation many face today.

A Room Nobody Wants for Themselves, 2019, challenged me in a few ways. On the one hand I wanted the materials to speak and attract attention to the crisis at the US-Mexico border, but I had a difficult time using the chain-link fence. I do not consider this piece entirely complete, however, its research, the making of it, and the reflections that it prompted, have proven important in the making of the works that followed.

Frontera

I crossed the border on foot in both directions, taking the time to meet with other Mexican nationals who were also crossing *la línea*, what locals call the border between San Diego and Tijuana. Many of the people crossing are Americans that travel to Tijuana in search of medical and dental service, and better restaurants for less money. For the average local inhabitant of Tijuana, the crossing of *la línea*, is a fairly normal activity. For me it was an opportunity to learn how these two cultures coexist.

The ICE detention center I attempted to visit was highly restricted, no visitors and heavy security despite our request to visit with donations of supplies for children and women. Witnessing the line of individuals while waiting to cross from Tijuana to San Diego was daunting. Their demeanor inspired the work that I will describe in the next few pages. I reflected on the *liminality* and uncertainty these individuals experience. They do not want to stay in Tijuana, they want to cross, for many reasons. Some of them expressed to me their wish to cross the border and live in the United States so they can experience a system *free of corruption*.

Judging and comparing their country with the United States is common for Latin Americans. For a Latin American the idea of pursuing the “American Dream” is a fairly common ambition, a goal to reach, a place to visit or move to, regardless of the plausibility to do so. Lately, the mirror image of the United States is shattered, blurry and potentially the inauspicious sign of seven years of bad luck. Octavio Paz states: “The U.S. has built its own world in its own image: in its mirror. But now he cannot recognize himself in his inhuman objects nor in his fellows”.²⁶

While in Tijuana and crossing to San Diego, I collected a bag of soil from both sides of the border. I wanted to bring the soil to my studio in Saint Louis. As I walked away from a group of onlookers, after collecting the soil, I reflected on the geographical, political and emotional implications that crossing the boundaries of a country can mean for an individual. There is a very popular expression in Mexico: *no soy de aquí, ni soy de allá*. (I am not from here, nor from there). Back in my studio nothing seemed enough to convey my sense of urgency and my need to speak about the lives I witnessed during my trip to the border. I made the decision to start a project reflecting on the ground; the soil; the land that displaces individuals and their connection to agriculture.

La Línea, 2020 (Fig. 12) is a series of works that are figurative drawings, loosely rendered, and are created with a mixture of clay and soil that I collected at the border between Mexico and the United States. The drawings are based on photographs of migrants from newspaper publications, which I have collected since mid-2019. The drawings are done on 6"x6" squares of Plexiglas. The intended installation of this work is to display them in a perpendicular position to the display wall. The installation will be a symbolic representation of individuals journeying to the United States and applying for asylum at the border. The dividers may be cubicles, bathroom stalls or unspecified institutional spaces. Those barriers symbolize the impediment for the entry of the long line of asylum seekers.

The use of soil from the border is my symbolic gesture dedicated to the individuals that try to transcend the border. The soil was collected from Tijuana, San Diego, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. The drawings imply the presence of the subjects without giving away their identity. This project and others in the current body of work have been intentionally limited in terms of

my use of minimal yet specific materials. This very specific and poetic use of materials informs of my current body of work and is also in conversation with the work of several contemporary artists, such as Doris Salcedo. I believe ethics and responsibility are at the core of Salcedo's work. Here are excerpts from an interview, in which she is asked about the diversity in materials and methods used in her work:

Most of the experiences (I draw from), but not all, come from victims that are Colombian. But the experience is not only Colombian; I'm afraid it is happening in many, many places. So that experience should be seen, I hope, as local, as everywhere. It is addressing experiences that unfortunately touch us as human beings. And I think it's important to have works of art that can somehow articulate that. Maybe if we stopped seeing it in national terms, we would learn from that. (...) The experiences I'm referring to are extraordinarily difficult: experiences of torture, violent death, rape, displacement. All these victims are thrown into the unknown. The familiar space—whatever they knew, the family they had, the space they owned—everything's shattered. (...) I'm trying to somehow address these experiences. I have to place myself in a similar situation. I'm evidently more comfortable [than the victims]; I'm not attempting to say that is the same. But I have to learn everything.²⁷

One challenge during the making of *La Línea* was the choice of size for the drawings. I did not want to diminish the importance of the individuals by installing the work on the ground. Displaying them on shelves did not seem appropriate choice, either. Creating this project, however, was very important. I believe the process of making each project gets us closer to understanding what the most essential aspect of each work is, its reason.

Welcome to Third Grade

The summer came. As expected, we would move yet again. Since our mother's death we moved every year to live with different relatives. We would pack into a single VW Beetle and drive across the country. To this day, I wonder how we all fit. We arrived in Valles in Northern Mexico during the monsoon season. It poured every day. I remember feeling excited about the rain. My cousins and I would play outside for hours. As preparations for the new school year began, I started to notice that my aunt was not happy. She complained about my hair... a lot. It was straight, incapable of holding my hair clips. As a mother of two boys, my aunt was not used to having to care for a girl. She took me to get a perm without asking for my opinion. She wanted me to appreciate the new hairstyle. Instead, every time I looked in the mirror, I was reminded that I was not welcome in her home. I prayed that the tight curls would be less noticeable by the time school began. They were not.

The weekend before third grade, my aunt bought me a pair of black rubber boots. They were too big for me and they were not the colorful ones my cousins owned, but never needed to wear. Unlike me, my cousins were driven to school every morning. On the first day of school I had to walk for 20 minutes in those clunky boots, my feet could barely keep them on. The mud was sticky and as I walked the boots pulled away from my feet. The suctioning noise from the boots fighting the mud, which I still remember, were enough for me to want to return home and give up on attending school that day.

At the entrance of the school there was a sign *Bienvenidos a la Escuela*, and yet the sign to me meant everything but welcome. I did not want to stay there. I desperately wanted to hide

the boots and pretend my parents had dropped me off at the main gate of the school, as all the other children were. The mud was halfway up my legs, (Fig. 13) and my curls were wet and stuck to my head, I felt ashamed, alone and embarrassed²⁸. I did not recognize myself, nine years old living in an unfriendly place with the hairstyle of a grandmother and the boots that reminded me of construction workers. That was the bitter start of a long year of non-hospitality. I wondered how many unwelcoming thresholds I would have to cross that year.

The memory of those rubber boots is the source of inspiration for the installation *Place*, 2020, (Fig 14-17). The installation consists of a growing number of unfired clay boots. I am in lockdown during the pandemic and the making of this project has taken on its own pace. These boots seem similar, they seem cloned to assemble a larger body, they seem the same, but they are not. These boots are different and contain nuances and elements that cannot be fully seen at first sight. They stand. I wonder if they come or go, whether they stand still in acceptance or they protest their fate. The boots are made of unfired clay, they possess the power of transformation and because they have been constructed, they can be deconstructed as well. Their presence is minimal, simple, repetitive. Yet their complexity cannot be understated. They are deserving of a place. A place where they count, where they speak, where they have a say, an influence in their journey.

They silently demand a place in the making of society, but are afraid, their voices filled with insecurities, uncertain about what they deserve. Their color matches the concrete in which they collapse and sleep. They are reluctant and hopeful. They welcome and reject the place they long for. One is giving up; the rest —strangers as they may be, encouraging each other to continue.

The journey of these boots will become performance: a constant effort to fit in especially

in new environments, a holder of memories of the past, a struggle and doubt in the present, and the overwhelming fear of the future. All of them travel with shadows, all of us do. All of them adjust to the new, all of us do. That shadow that weighs on us, is a sign of humanity. That shadow that we respond to is part of us and always will be.

The name of this work, *Place*, came to mind as I considered that everyone that ever moved from their place of birth or to a new home is searching for a place to belong to. But also, as an artist who meditates, I considered that a place where to sit and observe is synonymous with *now*: with the present moment. Zen teacher Dennis Genpo Merzel speaks of the impermanence of everything, including place:

Nothing is permanent, we are all homeless, only some of us realize it and some do not, (...) our nature has no place to settle down, no resting place, (...) there is no such place.²⁹

Place, 2020 has been produced during the pandemic, when the outcome of this crisis is unknown and impermanent. Although this is an unexpected context for the project, the space where the boots exist is appropriate. I am working in my unfinished basement with no windows nearby and only concrete floors and walls surrounding the growing numbers of these unfired objects/boots. The basement, cold and empty, has given me an opportunity to work on this meditative project, as if I have nowhere to go, because in fact, I can only be in this place, here and now, like so many, *Others*, I dedicate my work to.

The routine that I have established around the making of these objects/boots has a system to it by now. The eight-to-ten-hour process of making one pair of boots is definitely a labor of care and hospitality. Every pair brings up a new experience. And although the time spent on each pair is very similar, the materials almost always react differently. I've remained open to surprises and

difficulties, and as a result each object's form is experienced differently, despite all of them being cast from the same molds. This process concludes the last two years of reflections with a period of quietness and solitude, allowing for a Mindful routine I couldn't have expected. As I mediate in-and-out during my days with these objects, I recognize the nature of empathy and hospitality. I am taking care of these objects in a space of semi-retreat, with little sound and boot after boot I trim, clean, dry, extract, breathe, observe.

When I embarked on the process of making *Place*, I knew I wanted to begin by creating objects that would be physically and poetically related to the ground, to the earth beneath. Ground and earth connect migrants, refugees, travelers, and foreigners. I think of ground as a connector to all humans. Every individual will always think of their own place of birth. Many of the migrants I dedicate my work to, travel in search of land to harvest or to inhabit. Many of them travel on foot in order to arrive into the new land. Many of them are forced to sleep on the floor, on the ground. That is why the importance of ground is so significant to this piece.

The liminal, changing quality of clay as material interests me, especially when observing the clay reaching a point of latency between liquid and solid states, in relation to the place of liminality and uncertainty we all experience right now. When I began working on this project, I was focused on individuals suffering displacement and involuntary confinement; the conditions of living that are typical for concentration camps, war zones, detention centers and prisons. Today, the global pandemic and the living conditions around the world, have given me a new perspective on what it means to be confined, for everyone around the world.

Observing, reading and writing are important to this project. I have created one pair of boots since the start of my confinement. I wonder if I am hosting them or if they are hosting me. I am by now outnumbered. Each boot has another to relate to, they are a group and each object has a shadow that keeps them company. I reflect on their solitude and vulnerability as well as my own. I think of these objects in relation to my own experience during these uncertain times. I think of confinement, and the presence of unfired clay boots reminds me of prisoners, refugees, and migrants. These boots are objects that symbolize individuals while at the same time are part of a larger group. They stand alone experiencing their own journey in solitude. This work is dedicated to those who are devoid of any privacy and are denied of any intentional companionship.

Collectively, we now experience the strain of being limited, with our awareness now directed to a virus that places us in an uncertain realm. During the making of this installation I reflect on hospitality hostility as the current crisis is placing us all in such duality. My hope is that *Place 2020* is able to convey to the viewer the importance of considering Others and displacement and most importantly, the connectedness we all share today.

Conclusion

My current body of work redirects the viewer's attention to empathetic memory and to the ethics of Otherness. My work is poetic, in that it is based on expressive yet minimal materials. My work deals with the experience and the encounter of trauma that I take on and meditate with, through my projects. My works contain references to both life and death, light and shadow, dryness and wetness, heaviness and airiness, as well as to sadness and happiness.

This text has coupled the making of my art in the present, with the memories of my life in the past, to convey the mixture of what makes me the artist I am today. More importantly, I hoped to convey the reasons for my work to exist as a form of reaching towards Others.

Hospitality and hostility are rooted in the same word³⁰. I consider dualities and paradoxes a fundamental aspect of what I make. I find the mind to be the source of how and where creativity begins and how identity gets shaped. "The whole world is created from Mind, how we perceive it is the whole story"³¹, and sometimes thought and mindset, and our perception, cloud our experience.

Those we think of as Others are not to be feared or neglected, rather to be understood and considered a collective responsibility, as Emmanuel Levinas teaches us³¹. The moment we encounter the Other is the moment we encounter our own humanity. It is my hope that my poetic art conveys a philosophical understanding of how we must perceive the Other through hospitality rather than hostility.

Endnotes

¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous, Thinking of the Other*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 33. The ethical theory of the face-to-face encounter: “it is the presence for me of a being identical to itself, that I call the presence of the face. The face is the very identity of a being; it manifests itself in it in terms of itself, without a concept”.

² Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 57

³ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (New York: Grove Press Inc, Edition 1985), 195
The Labyrinth of Solitude was written in 1953 –In my opinion, the use of the pronoun *He* in 2020 may be more appropriately substituted by *She* or *They*.

⁴ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (New York: Grove Press Inc, Edition 1985), 203

⁵ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 13-14

⁶ Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Wherever You Go There You Are*, (NY-Boston: Hachette Book Group, Inc. 1994), 72 “When we commit ourselves to paying attention in an open way, without falling prey to our own likes and dislikes, opinions and prejudices, projections and expectations, new possibilities open up and we have a chance to free ourselves from the straitjacket of unconsciousness.”. Simply put, *open awareness* is observing what is taking place, with no judgement or added intellectual or mental commentary.

⁷ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (New York: Grove Press Inc, Edition 1985), 202.

⁸ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, The Souvenir, the Collection*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), “Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing (...) because it does not take part in the lived experience”, 23

⁹ Kandel, Eric R. *In Search of Memory*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 10110, 2006), 279.

¹⁰ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 30.

¹¹ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, The Souvenir, the Collection*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 67.

¹² Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 67.

¹³ Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope in the Dark*, (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, Third Edition, 2016) xxiv.

¹³ Salcedo, Doris. (Colombian b. 1958-). *La Casa Viuda, (the Widowed House)* 1992-95. Guggenheim Museum.

¹⁴ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 7: “The house, (...) without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life, it is body and soul, it is the human being’s first world”.

¹⁵ Raxruhá, Guatemala, municipality in the North of the Guatemalan department of Alta Verapaz.

¹⁶ Enacted in 2005 under President George W. Bush, this policy once gave privilege to those traveling with minors. Today the policy better reflects its name: those who arrive with children are shown no tolerance and are instead separated while they await asylum.

¹⁷ The mixture of soil used for *Earth Portraits*, 2019 was sourced in Texas, California, New Mexico and Arizona, the four states of shared borders between Mexico and the United States.

¹⁸ Butler, Judith. 2016, Zeit Online, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2016-10/judith-butler-donald-trump-populism-interview/seite-3>.

¹⁹ Jaar, Alfredo. (Chilean, b. 1956), *The Geometry of Conscience*, 2010, Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Chile. <https://ww3.museodelamemoria.cl/exposiciones/lageometria-de-la-conciencia>.

²⁰ Jaar, Alfredo. (Chilean, b. 1956), *The Silence of Nduwayezu*, 1997, 1 million slides, light table, magnifiers, and illuminated wall text. Table: 36 inches × 217 inches × 143 inches. Text: 6 inches × 188 inches. © Alfredo Jaar, courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York. Art 21.org.

²¹ Harvard University’s Attorney Enrique Moreno, El Paso, TX who defended Jakelin Caal Maquin’s case died in October of 2019. Source: El Paso Times, 2019.

²² Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (New York: Grove Press Inc, Edition 1985), 17.

²³ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 54.

²⁴ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous, Thinking of the Other*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 58.

²⁵ Francisco Galicia, 18, was born in Dallas and is a U.S. citizen, he was detained by federal authorities for twenty-three days, for deportation proceedings before he was released. The Dallas Morning News. July 24, 2019.

²⁶ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (New York: Grove Press Inc, Edition 1985), 21.

²⁷ Salcedo, Doris. <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/article/aconversation-with-doris-salcedo>.²⁹

²⁸ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (New York: Grove Press Inc, Edition 1985), 19: “When you sense that you are alone, it does not mean that you feel inferior, but rather that you feel you are different”. “A sense of inferiority may sometimes be an illusion, but solitude is a hard fact. We are truly different, and we are truly alone”.

²⁹ Merzel, Dennis Genpo. *The Eye that Never Sleeps: Striking to the Heart of Zen*” (Boston, MA. Shambala Publications, 1991), 11.

³⁰ Root of hospitality and hostility, *hostis* is the Sanskrit meaning 'to eat', 'to consume', or even 'to destroy'; enemy. Immanuel Kant notably defined hospitality as a precondition of what he thought would represent ‘eternal peace’, a world rid of hostilities. Source: www.helsinki.fi.

³¹ *The Eye that Never Sleeps: Striking to the Heart of Zen*” (Boston, MA. Shambala Publications, 1991), 11.

³² Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous, Thinking of the Other*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), 33: “the face is the very identity of being; it manifests itself in it in terms of itself, without a concept, (...), no mask hiding it, (...) it constitutes the total humanization of the Other”.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1 1975: *One Home Remembered by Six Children*, 2019.

Installation, six pieces 8 inch each, 60 x 21in. full piece. Plexiglas and board.

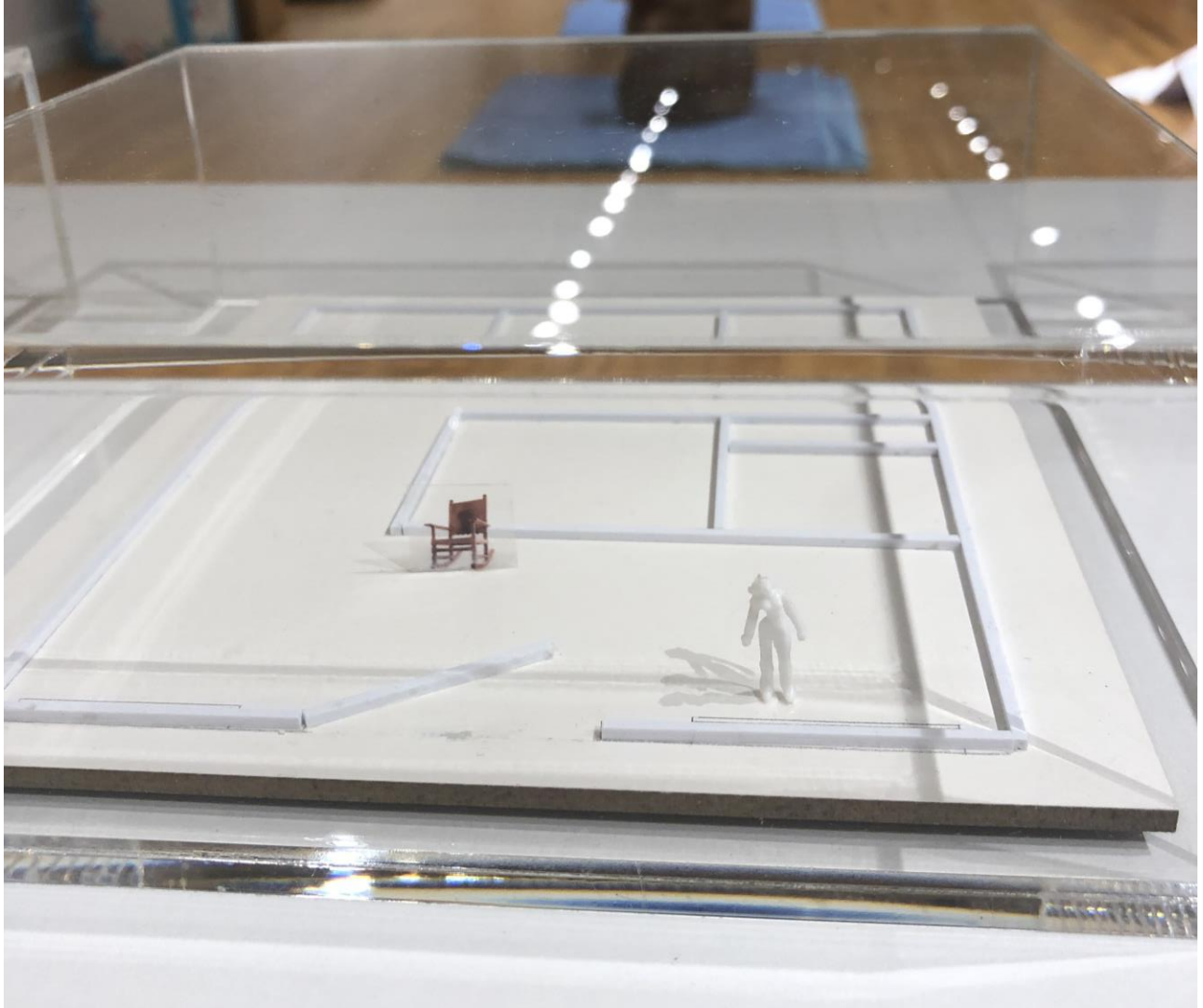


Fig.2 1975: *One Home remembered by Six Children*, 2019
(Detail image of one of the six house models).



Fig. 3 Film Still, Title: *One Spring Day* 2019, Film Length, 00:02:48.



Fig. 4 *Back Home*, 2018.

Mixed media, muslin and clay, 57x52 in.



Fig. 5 Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), *La Casa Viuda*, 1992-95, Guggenheim Museum.

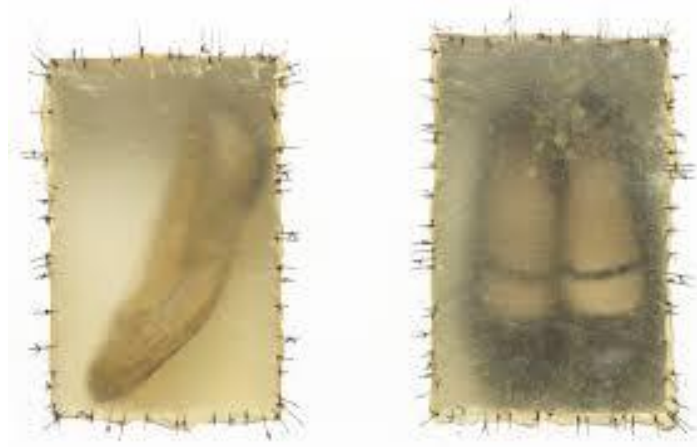


Fig. 6 Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), *La Casa Viuda IV*, 1992-95, Guggenheim Museum.

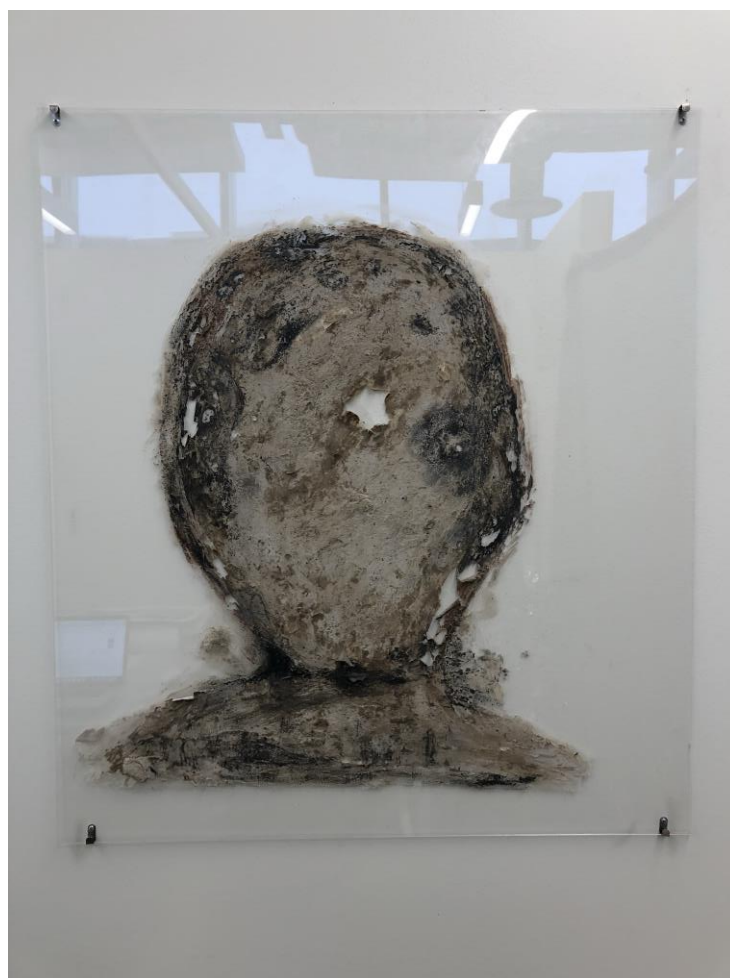


Fig.7 *Earth Portraits*, 2019, Mixed Media, (plexiglass, clay, corn, coffee and beans), each 32x32in.



Fig. 8 Jaar, Alfredo (b. 1956), *La Geometría de la Conciencia*, 2010.

Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Chile.



Fig. 9 Jaar, Alfredo (b. 1956), *The Rwanda Project: The Silence of Nduwayezu*, 1994. ArtForum.com.



Fig. 10 Playas de Tijuana. Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, 2020.



Fig.11 *A Room Nobody Wants for Themselves*, 2019. Mixed Media, metal, clay and fiber, 10'x6'.



Fig.12 *La Línea*, 2020, Mixed Media, (clay, soil, ground coffee and ground beans),
24 pieces, 6x6 in each.



Fig.13 Rubber boots prototype, clay slip and sodium silicate, 2020, 10.5x8.5 in. each.



Fig.14 *Place*, 2020, unfired clay, size 10.5x8.5 in each.



Fig.15 *Place*, 2020, unfired clay, work in progress, size 10.5x 8.5 in each.



Fig.16 *Place*, 2020, unfired clay, size 10.5x 8.5in each.



Fig. 17. *Place*, 2020, Unfired clay installation, approximately 48 pieces, 10x8.5 in. each.



Fig. 18 Last image taken of the growing unfired clay installation, 82 objects.