

ARTSEEN

REGINA JOSÉ GALINDO

by Thomas Micchelli

Exit Art

October 2 - November 21, 2009

Regina José Galindo's practice is the embodiment of Akira Kurosawa's dictum, "To be an artist means never to avert one's eyes," and she challenges the viewer to do the same, even as she's carving the word "perra" ("bitch") into the flesh of her thigh.

I first encountered Galindo's work in the Arsenale section of the 2005 Venice Biennale—three performance videos and a large gray cube where she hid during the first five days of the exhibition and whipped herself 256 times for the number of women systematically murdered in Guatemala so far that year. The three videos, "Skin," "Who can erase the traces?" and the notorious "Himenoplastia," are part of the current exhibition at Exit Art—Galindo's first solo in New York—as well as "Social Cleansing," "150,000 volts," and "Confession, which were featured in *NeoHooDoo* at PS1 at the end of last year.

These works taken together comprise a catalogue of masochism, humiliation, and debasement. They are also a chronicle of astonishing courage, ferocity, and selflessness. That there is no contradiction here is the sublime paradox of Galindo's art, which this show amplifies and elaborates. Although modestly billing itself a solo exhibition, it is in reality a full-blown mid-career retrospective (Galindo was born in 1974) of one the few young artists whose work can bear such scrutiny.

In the videos mentioned above, Galindo shaves off all her body hair and walks naked through the sun-bleached streets of Venice; leaves bloody footprints along the sidewalk leading to Guatemala's Corte de Constitucionalidad; has her hymen surgically reconstructed in extreme close-up (a botched procedure that landed her in the hospital); is blasted by a high-pressure water hose; gets Tasered until she collapses; and is assaulted by a muscle-bound brute who repeatedly plunges her head into a water-filled oil drum before tossing her like a wet dishrag to the floor.

The metaphorical power of these works obviates the need for prior knowledge that the bloody footprints are a protest against the presidential candidacy of

Guatemala's murderous (and U.S.-supported) ex-dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, or that her near-drowning in the oil drum follows declassified CIA guidelines on waterboarding. While grounded in politics and history (or, more precisely, politics as history), her simplicity of means (an uncomplicated idea executed by or on her own body) transcends a particular moment, brooking no difference between private and public. To see so much of her work at once, playing over Exit Art's multiple monitors and projection screens, is to sense it less as an artistic practice and more as an intrinsic, almost diaristic part of her life, a personal catharsis writ large.



Regina José Galindo, "Perra (Bitch)" (2005). Still from video documentation of performance. Courtesy of the artist, Exit Art and prometeogallery di Ida Pisani, Milan.

I found that the most difficult piece to watch, even more than "Himenoplastia," was "Perra" (2005), in which Galindo sits in a chair, folds back the fabric of her simple black dress, and incises her leg with the point of a knife until a thin line of blood emerges from the skin. This work, like her performance at the Venice Biennale, is in response to the plague of torture and murder afflicting hundreds of Guatemalan women every year, many of whom are found mutilated with words like "bitch" carved into their bodies. The hymen operation, for all its pain and gore, was performed by someone else, but Galindo purposefully inflicts "Perra" on her own flesh. We watch her brace herself, taking longer to gather her nerve before each letter, until she reaches the "A," where she pauses, the tip of the blade hovering above her bleeding thigh. It's a Gethsemane moment, equal parts vulnerability, acquiescence, and superhuman resolve. Her pain, she seems to be telling herself, is nothing compared to that suffered by the victims she mourns, and she returns the knife to her skin one more time.

Her performance is an act of radical empathy, an extreme manifestation of an artist's impulse to simultaneously feel and give form to feeling, and we recoil from it as we might have from the sufferings depicted by Luca Signorelli or Matthias Grünewald in the days before aesthetics trumped faith.

Despite Galindo's undeniable conviction and the seriousness with which she confronts atrocities and injustices, a legitimate question arises about her approach—one that can be briefly if crudely summarized as, does she wallow in it? I would be inclined to say yes if not for her improbable sense of humor, an element that is admittedly absent in the works I had seen before this show, but comes across here with a buoyancy that can be as shocking as her theater of cruelty. Her expression, except in the most difficult of circumstances, is less stoic than deadpan, a Buster Keaton for our day, enduring the interminable insults of existence not as a victim but as a realist. Galindo doesn't delude herself into believing she can change anything through her art. In an interview with Francisco Goldman of BOMB magazine, she professed no expectations from her work: when asked why she did "Himenoplastia," she answered, "I suppose that — like everything I do — this was done for me."

The complexity implied by that simple statement pulses throughout her art, whether she is walling herself inside a cinderblock cell; lying naked and pregnant on a bed, bound hand and foot by umbilical cords; blasting away on a firing range with a semiautomatic handgun; or allowing a plastic surgeon to demarcate all the "imperfections" of her body, an exercise that leaves her looking like an animated Cubist drawing. The absurdity and wit of many of her actions do not so much leaven the more harrowing aspect of her work as add to its pathos—a tragicomic mood swing that brings to mind Lear's dying lament, "And my poor fool is hang'd"—an outburst that could refer to his daughter Cordelia, whose body he bears as a symbol of slaughtered innocence, or to his sardonic, truth-telling Fool: two roles that Galindo has taken upon herself, voluntarily or not, wittingly or not, as she navigates the horrific muddle we've made of life on Earth.

November 2009