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An image of simulated torture from Regina José Galindo's 2007 video "Confesión," at Exit Art.

ART IN REVIEW

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REGINA JOSÉ GALINDO

Exit Art

475 10th Avenue, at 36th Street, Manhattan
Through Nov. 21

Regina José Galindo's show at Exit Art doubles as an overdue New York solo debut for Ms. Galindo, a Guatemalan performer and poet born in 1974, and a 10-year career retrospective. It is also easily one of the most ambitious and moving shows by any young artist in the city at present.

Physical violation and psychological duress, applied on her own person, are the basic themes of Ms. Galindo's endurance-test performances, with poetry never far away. Poetry is uppermost in her earliest videotaped piece, from 1999, when she suspended herself, dressed like an annunciate angel, high over a street in Guatemala City reading her verses aloud and dropping handwritten copies to a crowd gathered below.

Thereafter the performance took a darker, more carnal direction. In a 2002 work, still in an absurdist vein, Ms. Galindo endured a pummeling from a female wrestler. Two years later, in one of her most unnerving pieces, she submitted to — and filmed — reconstructive surgery to her hymen, a procedure undertaken or forced on women in the sex trade, for whom virginity, or the illusion of it, is an economic asset.

In recent years, episodes of debasement, self-imposed or otherwise arranged, though with unpredictable results, increased. Ms. Galindo sealed herself in an isolation chamber, had herself immobilized for days in a full-body cast and a straitjacket. In the video "Social Cleaning," she is brought to her knees by water sprayed from a high-pressure hose, of the kind used by riot-control police officers. In 2007, the year of the revelations of abuses at Abu Ghraib, she had herself subjected to a version of waterboarding, then shot with a Taser until she collapsed, unconscious.

There are many precedents for this grueling, body-centered art. Marina Abramovic, Valie Export, Ana Mendieta, Gina Pane and Yoko Ono come to mind, as, of course, does Chris Burden. But Ms. Galindo's version has its own fiercely focused recklessness, as well as a distinctive set of political and personal themes that come across most stirring in some of her physically less extreme pieces.

In 2003, in response to the prospective election of a former leader of a military junta, Ms. Galindo walked through the main square of Guatemala City carrying a basin of human blood into which she periodically dipped her bare feet, creating a track of red prints leading to the National Palace. In a more passive performance in 2007, she lay motionless and barely breathing on a table while a funeral parlor cosmetician applied heavy makeup to her face as if beautifying her for burial.

As in most of her art, the references were twofold: to the frequent and premature deaths, through crime, poverty and disease, of women in her volatile homeland; and to mortality as a fact of human life. The performances do not succeed equally in joining topicality to existential metaphor; the sight of the artist moping around in chains has, possibly intentionally, a comedic edge. But in many pieces the fusion works, and the cumulative effect of the show — organized by Exit Art's founders, Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo, with an insightful brochure essay by Nick Stillman — is potent.

-- *Holland Cotter*