

Regina José Galindo

A Guatemalan artist updates body art with a searing political twist.

By Joseph R. Wolin

The first thing a visitor to Exit Art's survey of the work of Regina José Galindo sees is a projected video of the artist standing naked before a stone wall. A man approaches and turns a high-pressure fire hose upon her. She attempts to stand still, but involuntarily shields herself from the pressure of the spray; her arms flail upward, she twitches, turns, hops and finally crouches. The assault stops with her panting on the pavement, doused and quivering. The video, *Limpieza Social* (*Social Cleaning*, 2006), runs only two minutes, but it is grueling to watch this familiar form of crowd control turned on the artist's body. That Galindo herself is small and brownish, with distinctly Indian features, while the man with the hose is large and white, calls to mind the "ethnic cleansing" waged against the rural Maya by the government of her native Guatemala during its vicious, decades-long civil war.

Galindo's performance art employs conventions of the genre—endurance, mortification of the flesh, symbolic actions—to explicitly evoke Guatemala's violent history. In *Confesión* (*Confession*, 2007), another of the five works highlighted as projections in the gallery's main space, a huge, muscular, bald man drags her into a dank room and repeatedly dunks her head into an oil drum full of water. Although brief and staged, this simulation of torture takes an apparent physical toll on the artist. She struggles against her captor, whimpers, gasps for breath, and is at last thrown to the floor like a rag doll. The script for this harrowing vignette, according to the wall label, came from a declassified CIA manual, suggesting not only the United States' direct involvement at various points in Guatemala's torturous past, but also the use of waterboarding during George W. Bush's war on terror.

¿*Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (*Who Can Erase the Traces?*, 2003) records Galindo in a long, sleeveless black dress, carrying a white enamel basin full of blood while walking through Guatemala City, past pedestrians, traffic and street vendors. Stopping every so often, she sets the basin down to dip her bare feet into it, leaving a trail of bloody footprints. Her path takes her from the Guatemalan Congress to the National Palace (the former seat of the executive branch), where, confronted by a row of police officers, she leaves the basin and two final footprints as a defiant protest against the Guatemalan Supreme Court's ruling that Efraín Ríos Montt—the most murderous of the military dictators of the 1980s—could run for president. Yet, beyond those specifics, Galindo's gesture resonates as a somber elegy for the victims of official brutality everywhere.

These videos reveal Galindo as a fearless performer, fierce, intense and direct. Her work borrows liberally from body-oriented artists of the 1960s and '70s, such as Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden, Orlan and Gina Pane, but by making her art so viscerally about current political realities, she endows gestures some 30 years old with renewed relevance and urgency—not an easy feat.

This isn't to say that all of Galindo's works prove equally powerful, however. Accompanying the projections are more than 30 other videos displayed on seven monitors documenting ten years of her activity which include several less compelling actions. *Recorte por la línea* (*Cutting in Line*, 2005) finds the artist standing naked in public



while a plastic surgeon draws on her with marker to suggest enhancements to her looks—a wan, low-risk cliché of feminist critiques of beauty. In *Picacebollas* (*Onion Peeler*, 2005), she mutilates onions in what seems less like a trenchant commentary on manual labor than abject slapstick, as snot runs down her nose onto the mound of chopped bulbs around her feet.

Moreover, a numbing fatigue can set in after watching dozens of videos in which she subjects herself (and occasionally others) to various painful, degrading or self-abnegating acts. This may be a problem endemic to exhibiting this kind of art, which constitutes only the documentation of ephemeral performances at particular places and moments. (It will be interesting to see if this is true of MoMA's Abramovic retrospective, planned for next spring.) A room of photographs that seem either too self-consciously "artistic" or merely like grainy blowups of video stills, along with a single sculptural self-portrait bust that makes the artist look like an ancient Roman matron, provides little relief. Nonetheless, like bloody footprints tracked through our consciousness, the best of Galindo's efforts are both brave and indelible.