

FERNANDO ARIAS

Human Rights

The work of the Colombian artist Fernando Arias (Armenia, 1963) is based on the versatile use of several materials used in the installation, sculpture, photography and video. The artist has privileged the possibility of immediate communication of contemporary facts, in order to reflect on the tragedy that affects his country, immerse in a war that goes on for several decades, producing a highly critical discourse by way of an intimate and personal treatment. Since the beginning of the 90's, Fernando Arias has been frequently shown in Colombia and abroad. His work is comfortably accommodated in the neo-conceptual tradition, equally fed by a Duchamp-Dadaist esthetics and by the influence of the Latin American political-historical conceptualism. His sculptures and installations are characterized by the use of non-conventional materials and household objects that interfere by means of ideological operations with highly political characteristics. His references to the armed conflict and the social situation in Colombia are mixed with other themes of global interest, such as neo-liberal economy, AIDS, poverty and the definition of gender.

Arias uses language with elegance, characteristic of a words magician, providing double meaning to popular expressions. In this way, he transgresses the limitations imposed by customs and convenience of language in its day-to-day use with the ingenious use of inversions and paraphrases.

During the last years Arias has been using video as an expressive media, due to its immediate characteristic and its adaptability to life conditions that the artist has adopted since moving to Chocó forest in 2006. There his work in the social field has taken shape in the creation of "Casa de Chocolate", a cultural center developed in collaboration with the inhabitants of Nuquí, on the Colombian Pacific coast, sponsored by the Dutch Prince Claus Foundation

A selection of more recent video works by Fernando Arias, a result of his long stay in Chocó, is shown for the first time in this exhibition at Galeria Eduardo Fernandes: *Humanos Derechos* (2008), *Violín* (2007), *Izando Bandera* (Hoisting up a Flag) (2007), *Enjoy your Meal* (2008), and reflect a respectfully intimate period, the resistance of a population threatened by isolation, precariousness, forced migration and racism. This exhibition includes the première of the video installation with four projections *Humanos Derechos, 2008 (5')* in which three members of groups involved in the armed conflict in Colombia, and a peasant undress in front of the cameras, removing the identity signs of each group, to remain naked, equal in their human condition. Fernando Arias' natural talent to play with language is seen in the titles he chooses, such as *Humanos Derechos* (Human Rights), an ingenious inversion of terms that hints to the erect position of those filmed and at the same time, it denounces the violations of human rights in situations of war.

The artist comments: the idea was born from my need to reveal the human condition of each one of these characters, of our society, and to place them at the same level, simply, with the naked body. Unarmed. Each person was filmed on a pre-established time and

their actions seem to be synchronized. The action of undressing is a sort of metaphor to the steps in reverse that people take when they want to free themselves through the creation of militias and ideologies, or when they are recruited without another alternative.

Human Rights focuses on the human aspects of the people, whether fighters or defenseless victims, in the war fronts and conflicts. It also points out how the social environment and the circumstances within which one grows up many times result in hatred and intolerance towards the “other”.

Once again Arias transgresses the language entitling the only object presented in this exhibition as *Paz Aporte/ A contribution to peace*, produced by Daros Latinamerica, as a limited edition. The multiple *Paz Aporte* consists of a series of false Colombian passports, printed in white – the emblematic color of peace – with the arms of the country altered, showing on the cover a sumptuous metallic finished bullet, of phallic characteristic. With such intervention on a ready-made, Arias refers to two facts connected to the Colombian social-political conditions: he bitterly comments on the prejudice that follows the Colombians when crossing the borders with a passport that evokes violence, drugs and illegality, at the same time that it transforms the national pride in a lethal weapon.

Izando Bandera, 2007 (1’) is a satirical vision of the public power and its alliance with the anachronistic male chauvinism that is found in Colombia. The naked profile of a young man posed in a military posture of firmness, with his erect penis, symbol of a phallic power dominating the country, at the sound of the national anthem. The title of this work is a reference to the Youth Games in which “hoisting up a flag” is the expression associated with an erection.

Violin, 2007 (10’) is a short film about blindness in its real and metaphoric expressions, a melancholic and subtle portrait of the relationships of dependence between members of a community in precarious situations. The protagonist is Violín, an eleven-year-old boy that looks after his blind grandmother, Dona Mauricia, living in a shed in Chocó. The passivity that emerges from the basic daily life actions of these beings denotes the blindness in a society in face of poverty and the lack of medical assistance in these areas on the Pacific coast, where those rejected are mainly African-Colombian and native peoples. Violín is the hands, eyes and feet of his grandmother, guiding her and providing for her in exchange for his childhood. The time of this video summarizes with poetic precision the slow pace of life in Chocó, where time stood still, slipping into lethargy because of the tropical wind, expanded and increased by the no-flavor of inertia. The prodigal and wild nature of the wettest region on the planet – which biodiversity is comparable to the Amazon basin – holds histories of displacement and instability only endured by the strength of hope and resistance.

Enjoy your meal, 2008 (16 ‘) the noise of a restaurant in a modern city contrasts with the images of a fishing boat on the Pacific coast of the dense tropical forest: the relationship between the two facts is imperceptible to the contemporary consumer. The documentary by Fernando Arias comes close to the problematic of exploitation of resources in bordering countries, to satisfy the demand of global markets and reveals how such excessive uncontrolled exploitation modifies – irreparably – the economies and lifestyles of producing countries. Huge, succulent shrimps are fished on the shores in front of Chocó, to satisfy the demands of “developed” countries to eat what and when

they want.

The manual making of canoes used in traditional fishing, the unavoidable deforestation that follows the extraction of raw materials are shown in the documentary as fragments of a hidden reality that advances, step by step, towards devastation and consequent unemployment and displacement of the population.

The fragments and lives are connected by means of the food production chain in the global economy. Its impact reverberates around us, whether we are aware of its existence, or not.

Gabriela Salgado, Curator of public programs at Tate Modern, London, August 2008