



## **COCO GUZMAN - LOS FANTASMAS / THE GHOSTS**

September 4 – October 14, 2015

Coco Guzmán's *The Ghosts* is set against the backdrop of a political and cultural movement in Spain of recent years to address the legacy of its civil war (1936-1939) and subsequent dictatorship: a process known as the recovery of historical memory. Like many other artistic approaches to this process, *The Ghosts*, a series of drawings created by the artist between 2009 and 2013, seek to break through the silent sediment of fear and forgetfulness that settled over Spain following the death in 1975 of the fascist dictator Francisco Franco.

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich frames historical memory as the recovery of "cultural trauma" – a collective residue of national shock and injury that encompasses, and is also greater than the sum of personal memories. Cultural trauma, in line with the psychological understanding of trauma, suggests numbed silence in the face of overwhelming distress. There are secrets that have yet to be told. Memory of trauma is treacherous. It is fragmented and partial; it's contested and not entirely reliable. Coco's drawings break through the surface of historical memory's settled soil to grapple with what can no longer remain secret.

A ghostly echo of the fascist forces that moved across Spain in the course of its civil war can be traced through the sequence of drawings. The series begins in the south, where Franco's troops first landed, and shifts across the various landscapes and cities of Spain, making specific visual references to the architectural features, flora, and fauna of each region. The drawings evoke many of the better known (and some of the lesser known) sites of Franco's atrocities, as well as sites of resistance to them.

The drawings show vignettes of lives lost. They depict a Spain in which physical remains of the horror are ever-present. Each forgotten body has its own story, and that story is trying to be heard as it pierces through the earth and collective silence into the contemporary Spain above.

*The Ghosts* is the story of a horrific secret that haunts and tortures the present. Hundreds of thousands of murdered Spaniards lie in unmarked, sometimes forgotten, mass graves. Franco's victims lack materiality. The physical evidence of the crime is buried and still to be unearthed. And yet, in present-day Spain, as Coco suggests, these ghosts have another kind of presence. Past trauma and its dead continue to have an impact on the present even if the living wish to forget them.

Spain is now witnessing a resuscitation of the unhealed traumas of the civil war. The polarizing conflict between ultra-conservative and progressive forces is being played out once again in the context of the current economic crisis. Fresh suffering comes to the Spanish people through austerity and austerity's barbarisms – forced evictions of mortgage defaulters, police repression of demonstrators, xenophobic and racist outpourings – all of which generates new "angry" resistances, such as Occupy's forerunners, the *indignados*. Psychologists would

undoubtedly recognize this intrusion of Spain's past upon its present as one of the primary symptoms of trauma.

After several years working on the project, Coco dedicated the better part of 2013 to drawing at least eight hours a day. And yet while that could have been a lonely process, Coco never felt alone. All the time they\* worked, they felt as though there was someone – some presence – behind them.

From a transnational distance, the weight of past trauma does not exercise the same constraint of silence as it does on those who live in Spain. Outside, there's more chance the stories will be heard. As artists like Coco begin to break through the silence, the ghosts' stories will resonate beyond their own country and communicate with the cultural traumas of many other nations, Canada included – a people also troubled by the secrets of their collective past.

- Paulie McDermid, 2015

Paulie McDermid is an independent scholar working at the intersections of Spanish culture, performance studies, and queer studies. He is the author of *Love, Desire and Identity in the Theatre of Federico García Lorca* (Tamesis, 2007).

\*Coco's preferred pronoun is "they," used in the singular as a gender-neutral term.

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