

Encounter, Dialogue and Presence in Doris Salcedo's Works

Authors : Wen-Shu Lai, Yi-Ting Wang

Abstract : The purpose of this paper is to discuss and clarify what are the essences of Colombian-born sculptor Doris Salcedo's works. Under the frameworks of Buber's dialogical philosophy of the "I-Thou relation" and Zumuehlen's philosophy of "Art as Presence" within the context of art praxis, Salcedo's selected works are analyzed and interpreted. Salcedo's sculptures and installations have expressed her concerns of the collective and personal memories within the context of Colombia's violent, historical and political conflicts, especially the trauma inscribed onto her fellow people. Salcedo tried to rescue that memory though her work does not directly represent the violent incidents happened in Colombia. They are indirect portraits of the disappeared, the victims, and the lack of identity. What the viewers see is something in between vanishing and emergence, personal and collective. The work, the artist and the viewer are witnesses and also survivors of Columbia's violent incidents. On the site, the work, the disappeared and the witness-survivors encounter each other, then mourning, memory and dialogue are unfolded, brought to present. Firstly, it is the power of encounter that allows the viewer-witness to recognize the effaced victims, repressive violence, and the profound mourning for the loss, then restore their existence through dialogues and bring them to present. In her sculptures and installations, the displacement of the fragments and the incoherent sites make these daily household objects become unfamiliar, arose feelings of uncanniness of the viewer. The feelings of alienation, confusion, displacement bring the viewer to here and now. The more one studies these objects and sites, the more hidden details begin to appear. And the more one looks at the details, the more absent memories or stories reveals themselves and becomes present. Salcedo's work is about loss, displacement and alienation caused by violence. She expressed that words are no longer possible when one deals with violence. However, her installation translates the violence, memory, and loss of beloved ones into a place of dialogue, in which the visitors can immerse themselves in a twilight zone between knowing and not knowing, remembering and forgetting. The spaces are the sites or non-sites inhabited by the remains or traces of the victims, the wonders of the survivor-witnesses where they join together through encounter, remain present to others through genuine dialogue. In the moment, the past memory and the ongoing life merge, accept each other, and reconcile. Salcedo reconfigures the silent violence and repressive history in Colombia and transforms them into sites and installations. The victims, the viewer and the artist join together while contemplating and sharing the human situation of silent repression. In the moment of contemplating, a dialogue, spoken or not, occurs in the specific sites. People have become aware and present, and mutual understanding has achieved. This research concludes that encounter, presence and dialogue are the three essences embedded in Salcedo's works.

Keywords : dialogue, Doris Salcedo, encounter, presence

Conference Title : ICAH 2015 : International Conference on Arts and Humanities

Conference Location : Singapore, Singapore

Conference Dates : March 29-30, 2015