

Features

Violence, Voyeurism, and the Place of Art

By Brian Karl February 20, 2019

In-depth, critical perspectives exploring art and visual culture on the West Coast.

The art installation *Pyre* (2016) takes forensic reports as a recipe to stage the amount of matériel purportedly necessary to incinerate a human body: 71 liters of gasoline, 23 used car tires, and 760 kilograms of wood. The precision of *Pyre*'s source quantities conjures the calculations made by brutally arbitrary yet efficient narco-traffickers. Professional criminals, as we know from television, are nothing if not technocratic.

An instruction piece by the Mexico City–based artist Joaquín Segura, *Pyre* takes on new meanings in different settings, reminding us that it's not just the physical work that makes for site-specificity in art exhibitions but also the location of an installation. Within *Pyre*, sedimented into geo-specific layers of meaning, are questions about how we respond to the failure of government and often-hidden, interwoven politics. The work also asks: what are the geneses and consequences of violence, vigilantism, and voyeurism?

Pyre was installed in the fall of 2018 at Galería Hilario Galguera, a former manor house in the Colonia San Rafael, a neighborhood the gallery calls "one of the oldest in Mexico City ... from the era of Porfirio Díaz." Referencing this military general and long-time Mexican president invokes the ambiguity of the country's decolonization from the French and Spain and the launch of the modernization that continues to overwhelm Indigenous life. The *colonia* serves now as a locale for theaters and galleries, as well as for artists' studios, following common urban gentrification patterns. The clean, tree-lined streets outside and white-washed walls inside the gallery make a curiously rarefied setting for *Pyre*'s imagined prelude to forced immolation. As one contrasting cultural setting, recall Vietnamese Buddhist Thích Quảng Đức's 1963 self-immolation in a highly public Saigon intersection, ensuring worldwide circulation of his final moments to protest the corrupt US-backed Diem regime.



sealed in a jar. *Pyre*, done with the specter of the horrific effect, if those materials were to be ignited, is a quiet, efficient instrument of destruction. The work's variable dimensions, stacking in to create a human body – both victims and perpetrators. If viewers are the only human bodies present, they become stand-ins for either, or both?

Later in 2018 and into the first weeks of 2019, *Pyre* was on display at 3320 18th Street, organized by Jordan Stein with Ivan Muñiz Reed. This single-room gallery is a rather provisional space on a second floor, above a cushion manufacturer and distributor, nestled amid several individual artists' workspaces in San Francisco's Mission District, itself a Spanish colony before the United States' military conquest. The Mission is now home to generations of immigrants from Central America, though intensive recent gentrification has impelled demographic shifts. Prior to its Mexico City and Mission installations, *Pyre* was exhibited in Australia and Argentina at nonprofit galleries in groupings of politically minded work.

If *Pyre* is about re-witnessing a pre-crime, what crimes resonate in its various exhibition localities? In Australia, the settler-colonialism that destroyed Indigenous populations and culture overlaps with the geopolitical concerns that maintained domination of underclasses across the globe, through a neo-liberalist status quo of valuing capital over life. Argentina, congruently, had its Dirty War, prosecuted by the government against its own citizens, in the 1980s.



Joaquín Segura: *Pyre* was on view at 3320 18th Street in San Francisco through January 20, 2019. Enrique Ježik and Joaquín Segura: *Theatre of Operations* was on view at Hilario Galguera Gallery in Mexico City through November 2, 2018. Courtesy of 3320 18th Street. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

Such projects provoke the question: when do witnessing and empathy turn into banal, lurid voyeurism? In performing “the gaze,” viewers may experience abstractions of actual events, potentially keeping their emotional responses corralled. Voyeurism maintains the safe distance of non-involvement. Others’ perpetration and victimhood smear into a sort of pornography, a fascination with others’ damaged and disappeared bodies, what Freud called “a burning and tormenting curiosity to see,” however much motivated by supposedly right reasons.

Think of the layered gallows of Sam Durant’s *Scaffold*, which referred to seven different lethal moments in US history, including the 1862 hanging of thirty-eight Indigenous Dakota men in Mankato, Minnesota. The artwork’s reception varied radically based on location. Exhibited in Europe without controversy, *Scaffold* was part of a planned 2017 reopening of the Sculpture Garden at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, eighty miles from Mankato. The piece provoked protests from regional Native American communities at the disregard that both Durant and the Walker demonstrated in reopening old, but still painful, psychic wounds among those very communities the piece attempted to represent.

With *Pyre*, are viewers put in positions of greater complicity as witnesses, as bystanders to a violence that has both already taken place and yet threatens still to happen? Whether *Pyre*’s contexts as well as its materiality contribute to the apprehension of something latent (just out of sight) or to outright dread depends, of course, on individual sensibilities. The degrees of remove from sites of traumatic crimes symbolized by sculptural forms can also generate different qualities of impotence, numbness, or outrage among viewers. This is another sense in which place can be said to matter.

Responding to Indigenous objections to the Walker version of *Scaffold*, Durant ceded both the physical sculpture (which was disassembled and removed from public space) and the conceptual rights to the artwork to the native community in and around Mankato. The sculpture’s wooden physical elements were ultimately buried in a ceremony rather than burned, since Dakota consider fire to be sacred and not simply some tool to be used for destruction.

Pyre’s conflagrations, on the other hand, are more willfully transgressive, however much they remain mere intimations. Something smoldering in the background catalyzes complicated thoughts, or at least feelings, but leaves us wondering: where is the action?

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