

A dark, expressive painting of a face, rendered in shades of black, red, and white. The style is highly textured and gestural, with visible brushstrokes and splatters. The face is the central focus, with the eyes and mouth area being particularly prominent. The overall mood is somber and intense.

CHANTAL MEZA

**STATE OF
DISAPPEARANCE**

STATE OF DISAPPEARANCE

THE ART OF
CHANTAL MEZA



1989
TECALI, MÉXICO
OCTOBER

BIOGRAPHY

Chantal Meza is a self-taught abstract painter living and working in the United Kingdom. Her home environment placed her amongst many local stone Artisans whose unique regional skills date back to the pre-Hispanic period. With direct family participation Chantal has incorporated this knowledge into her paintings, including the direct use of hands as a medium of human sensorial creation. The crossover between the old artisan techniques and Chantal's self-taught methods represents both a marriage and a visual memory of experience that allows her to connect the abstract with the tangibility of life.

Materials such as Marble and Onyx are seeded into Chantal's subconscious memories and have been the base for the creation of her own natural abstract Self-scapes. Oils, Stones, Watercolours, Charcoals and Inks are some of the materials she has taken to focus on the human psyche as seen through the prism of colour. She has found in Abstraction a language that through its gestures she is able to present her concerns around the political-scientific sphere and those shifting powers. Her challenge as such remains how to express the abstract in thought.

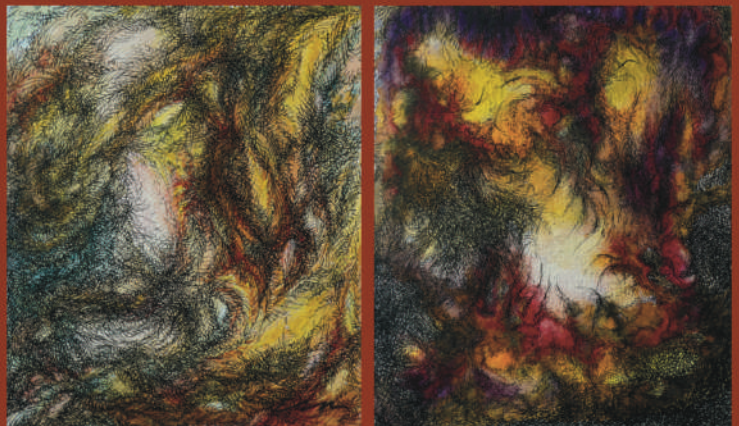
Her works have been Exhibited in more than 30 group and Individual Exhibitions in prominent Museums and Galleries in Mexico, Paraguay & the United Kingdom. She has also been commissioned to produce Public works, Interventions, while providing requested Donations of works to Institutions and Non-governmental Organisations. As part of the study of the subjects she is interested in she has delivered Lectures, Seminars and Panels at reputable places such as: Harvard University (USA), École Normale Supérieure (Paris), McMaster University, (Canada), Goethe Universität (Germany), Centre for Mexican Studies (Ireland) among others. She has written a number of Academic Articles in prominent Theory, Culture and Educational practice Journals, and she is currently co-curating a book titled "State of Disappearance" to be published in 2023 with McGill-Queens University Press.

Having presented her work in an individual curated exhibition at the age of 20, since then Chantal has received considerable acclaim. Among her recent achievements includes a notable Public Recognition for her contribution to Culture in her province in Mexico and the publication of her work in a number of prominent International Media Outlets, including La Jornada, ArtLyst, Trebuchet, W&F Science & Peace, LA Review of Books, The Philosopher as well as digital and print magazines, along with appearing on the covers of numerous books.

For Chantal 'the shape of the abstract senses' remains a primary concern, as it gestures to what remains within and yet seems ungraspable. In her work a constant realisation remains, that in which what we are is never enough, perhaps too unreal that most of our intended actions are kept in the realm of the imagination. Mindful of this, she is confronted with a dilemma; showing how an abstract sensibility is all we could fleetingly possess. In this regard, Chantal's range of work offers visual dynamic confrontations, tapping into the complexity of the human condition. In a world dominated by Science and Technology, her paintings have become a mediation between the mystery and the unknown, letting her hands to become the bridge that transmits the inner most feelings to the external world.

"All of Meza's work refuses Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's insistence that "all reification is forgetting," and in doing so, it offers us a powerful visual pedagogical register regarding how we see, remember, and hopefully act differently. Meza's art is cultural and pedagogical work at its best and offers us a new map of meanings, desire, and hope with which to think, fight back, and inhabit difference as a source of solidarity and community".

Henry A. Giroux



STORY OF THE DISAPPEARED

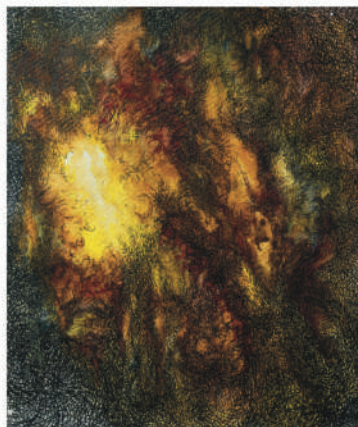
BY BRAD EVANS

For the few remaining women of Calama in Chile's Atacama desert, September 11 holds a terrifying meaning. They understand the pain of watching forensic investigators meticulously scour through particles of dust, seeking to retrieve the tiniest fragments of lives brutally taken from the world. They know what it means to face devastating absence, knowing the bodies of loved ones will never be returned. But their loss has nothing to do with the attack on New York's twin towers.

Fifty years ago, in the early morning of September 11 1973, a US-backed coup led by General Augusto Pinochet began with Chile's military taking control of strategic locations in the capital city Santiago, including the main radio and television networks. At 8.30am, a declaration was broadcast that the military was now in control of the country. While the elected president, Salvador Allende, refused to concede power in what turned out to be his farewell address, Pinochet's undemocratic forces surrounded the presidential palace. A few hours later, the centre of Chilean democracy was bombed by a fighter jet and set ablaze. Allende died from gunshot wounds the same day.

Chile under Pinochet would become the experimenting ground for an economic project that inspired both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and went by the name of neoliberalism. But it was also an experimenting laboratory for the torture and enforced disappearance of human beings. During the 16 years of Pinochet's reign, 1,100 people were officially registered as "forcibly disappeared". Only 104 bodies were ever found, although local communities put this figure much higher. Some were abducted due to their political associations and beliefs, others for sexual abuse. And some were just randomly selected to send the message that nobody was immune to the threat of vanishment.

Since 2017, I have co-directed the State of Disappearance project with Chantal Meza, which researches and promotes better understanding of this form of violence that haunts many societies when they seek a transition to peace. Chile's day of terror is not alone in the annals of human suffering.



There is in fact a global topography of terror, in which the weaponisation of absence has been learned, exported and its lived effects devastatingly felt throughout the Americas and beyond. This raised crucial questions for us, not least: - what role can art and political philosophy have when the human is denied any rightful claim to the world?

The strategy of disappearance is so shocking and difficult to comprehend because the violence is rationalised, professionalised and calculated. It is never random, even if its targets appear to have been arbitrarily selected. Its currency is emotional fear that infects the population like a virus, creating a climate of suspicion and betrayal.

While the modern era of state-led policies of disappearance developed through the countries of South and Central America, the techniques were honed at the School of the Americas (now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), a US Defense Department training facility at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. For 21 years, South American countries were subject to a covert campaign of political repression and state terrorism coordinated by the CIA and characterised by frequent coups and assassinations. During the darker chapters of this Operation Condor, policies of violence against the US's ideological leftwing enemies spread throughout the continent's southern cone like wildfire. Military generals and officers from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and later Brazil all trained at the infamous US facility, learning the most effective strategies to destroy opposition and govern their people by instilling a culture of everyday fear.

Some estimates put the number of enforced disappearances directly linked to this operation at around 80,000, including a staggering 30,000 bodies taken from the streets of Argentina. While these included known activists and prominent spokespersons demanding social justice and reform, others who only had a very tentative opposition to the military junta and its neoliberal aspirations were among the victims. Indeed, the terms "disappeared" and "disappearance" first entered the political lexicon during Argentina's dictatorship of the mid-1970s, when the state – backed by the US in its so-called "dirty war" – kidnapped and killed those it perceived to be a threat to its operations and ideological foundations, literally disappearing their bodies. In many cases, the disappeared would vanish without any witnesses to their abduction. People were swiftly taken from the streets and thrown into cars – in Argentina, Ford Falcons became a symbol of terror – or stolen from their beds in the solitude of the night.

Beyond the spectacle of violence, there is a deeper reason why disappearance is so effective as a political and psychological strategy. Psychologically, it plays into the most primal of human fears: to vanish without a trace. It induces what the academic Jean Franco called a "triple deprivation – of body, of mourning, of burial". In the act of disappearing life, not only is there a denial of justice that requires the reappearance of victims' bodies for a crime to be proven. There is also a denial of the political process that demands negotiation with past tragedies so the future can be steered in a better direction. This is what makes disappearance a true crime against humanity: it is a form of violence that makes it hard to restore something of the human condition. Not only does it deny a person the most basic right to belong to the world, it creates an economy of terror that lives on in the minds of relatives and friends – a form of "future violence".

Psychological studies of families dealing with missing persons have spoken of a "vortex of grief". Dealing with what the International Red Cross identifies as "ambiguous loss" demands new therapeutic responses that appreciate the lasting effects of this absence. Close relatives are often deeply traumatised and haunted by "intrusive memories". Studies of those living in the aftermath of the Holocaust have shown how trauma can also be transmitted across generations. Yet despite all this evidence, not enough attention is paid to the lasting psychological and social impacts on communities living with disappearance. Part of the problem is that many of these communities are desperately poor and already disenfranchised. In life they are often forgotten, so is it any wonder that in death they are denied?

THE POWER OF ART

In June 2023, Argentina repatriated a plane from the US that had been used in the campaign of death flights, in which victims were thrown from the air while still conscious. The extent of this strategy was only properly understood when bodies started washing up on the shores of the Rio de la Plata in December 1977 as a result of a freak weather pattern. The repatriated plane will soon go on display at the former navy and mechanics school in Buenos Aires (now the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory), a clandestine detention facility in which many of the disappeared were held before their disposal.

The re-emergence of such items, which also includes a fleet of Ford Falcons used by the death squads, highlights the importance of material objects that give at least some visible form to the violence of absence. In the same way, it is understandable why we see so many families and campaigners harnessing the power of art to represent their loss.



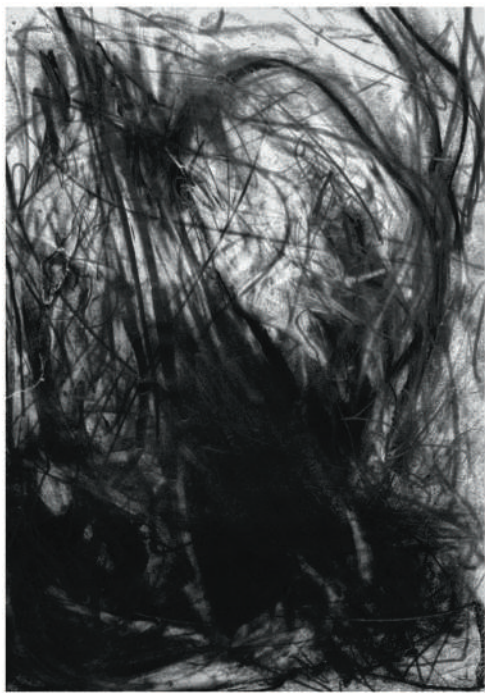
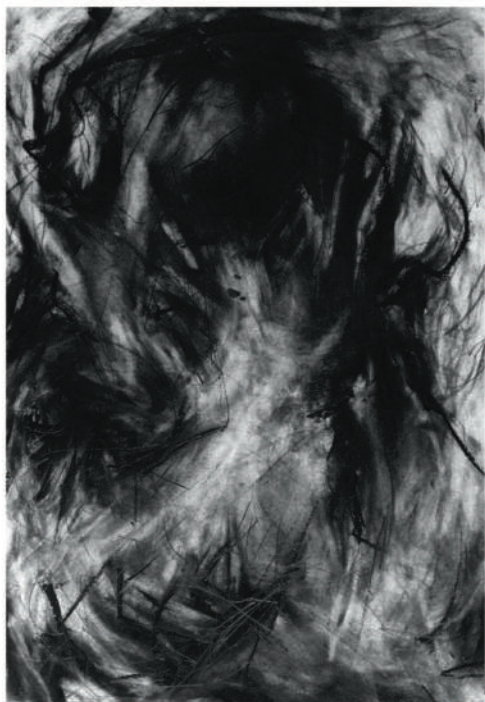
There can be no peace at a macro level if individuals and communities remain traumatised by wounds that cannot heal because of a gaping absence. It is here we turn to art.

Art reveals better than anything the spirit of freedom. It is no coincidence that the Nazis put the so-called "degenerate artists" on trial, nor that the Pinochet regime disappeared the musician Víctor Jara, whose tortured and bullet-ridden body was discovered days after his abduction. Jara's creative sensibility marked him as a prime enemy of the Chilean state. There is nothing an authoritarian personality despises more than free expression and creation, for it is the essence of resistance. Moreover, through art, difficult conversations become possible. A door is opened that may allow something of the human to be recovered. Our project began as a result of the artistic demand to respond to the horrors of enforced disappearance in Chantal Meza's country, and has since instigated a series of international collaborations. We haven't claim to be able to resolve this egregious practice, nor has it sought to impose any political doctrine, but tries to open up new conversations on what disappearance means, the forms it takes, and how to better imagine our response.

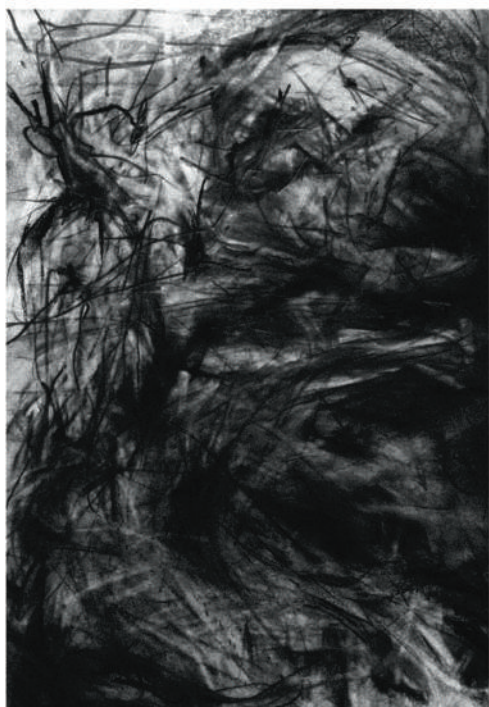
Meza's art confronts these questions in 75 works that explore themes of obscurity, mental anguish, ghosting, the fragmentation of life, and the voiding of existence. The heart of this work, she explains, is making visible what has been forgotten so that we might rethink what humanity means: "Disappearance constitutes a form of violence that rips open a wound in time. It weaponises the visual, as the terror it induces becomes prey to what is no longer seen. Part of the demand for justice, then, has to concern memory. This means to humbly consider the role of visual testimony, which the arts can help with. As artists, we can only venture to wonder the meaning of disappearance – whether in brushstrokes, dancing movements, musical compositions or the written word. But our lost worlds and the limits of our straight answers can be fiercely poured into those creations. Maybe through our encounters with artists and other collaborations, we find it easier to appear and disappear – to be never found, but just to leave a trace.



"The imaginal in Chantal Meza's art pulverizes the gaze and conscripts the viewer in its call, which addresses those who look and those who refuse to look – as another type of (un)seeing. Her own conversion to witnessing was not accidental. She visited Chiapas in Mexico in 2017 and met with the Zapatistas and related communities affected by systematic disappearances committed by the federal government. The subject matter is critical to Meza's aesthetic choices – the tension between painterly abstraction and the figuring of disfiguration. As Gustave Flaubert asserts, with pure art, the subject is irrelevant, "style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things." Meza articulates the psycho-poetics that gestures toward the co-originary of earthly existence and the cohabitation of alters".









"I was struck by Meza's series *Fragments of a Catastrophe*, which accords with Theodor Adorno's famous characterization of modern art as an "explosion," which is one of its "invariable traits." I was reminded that the task of modern art is homologous with the task that I faced as a writer, that of turning what has passed into silence into a loquacious explosion".

Michael J. Shapiro

"Meza's work refuses the affective economy of the face that was referenced earlier, and I focus here on her monumental project *State of Disappearance* as a way of teasing out how facelessness, the nonhuman, and the abstract can help us to confront, contest, and resist the realities of forced disappearance in contemporary Mexico. Here, I continue to consider the link with the spectral through a focus not on specific ghosts but on ruptures in space and time, on the afterlife of disappearance, and on how Meza's abstract swirling shapes are an attempt to capture the chaos of disappearance, to articulate its humanity, and to share in its grief".

Nuala Finnegan



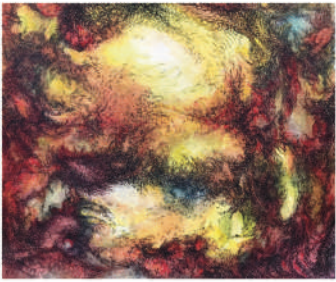
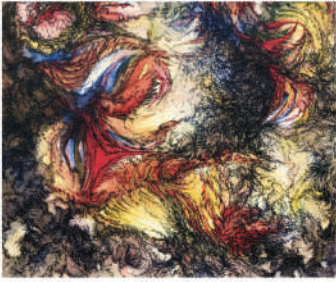


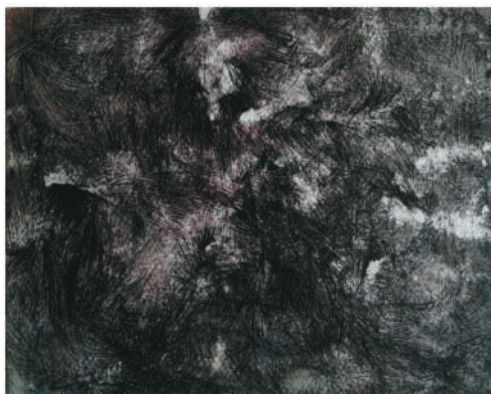
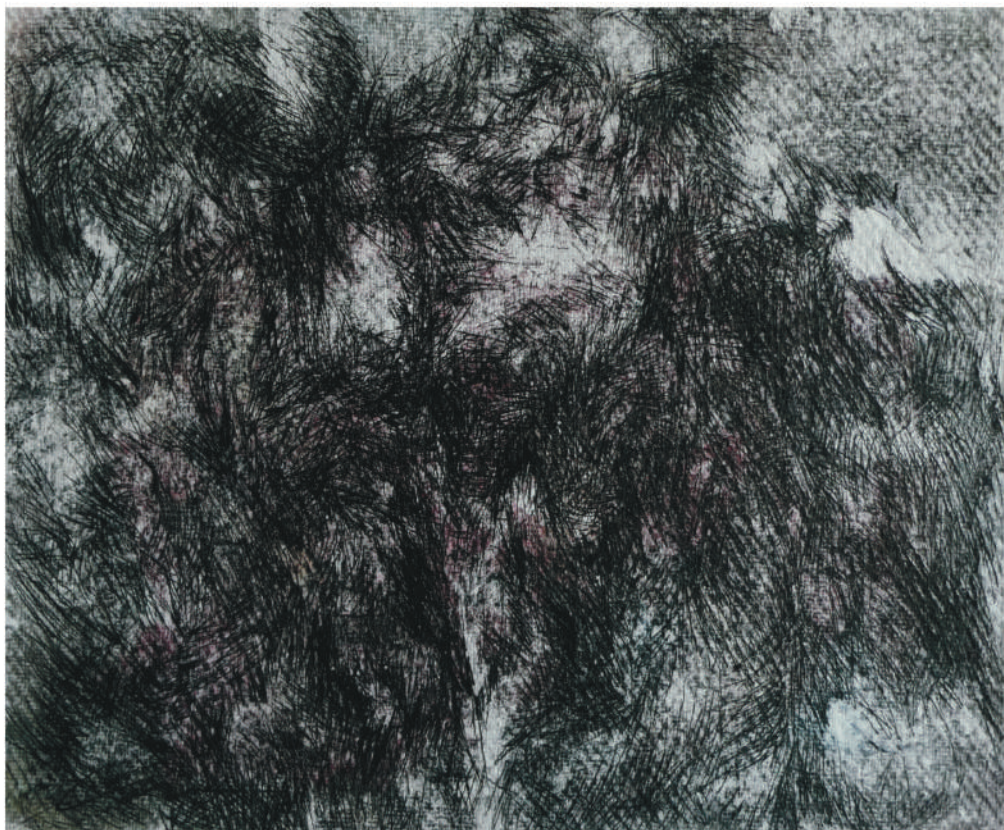














"Maybe in art I could find better resources for thinking this matter through. I recall Barnett Newman, the vast emptiness of his paintings. Images of spaces made such that one can go into them and disappear. Newman who always preferred the tundra to Paris. Newman who just wanted the paint on the canvas to look as good as it did in the tube. Then I think of Chantal Meza's series *Since the Beginning*. Didn't she paint disappearance? That one image of hers with all the colours and intricacies of a vast placenta. "Disappear, where?" it asks. "The body," it replies. Yet the body that she paints is no maternal home. I see there a deranged tree of life that promises to strangle me in its torments."

Julian Reid





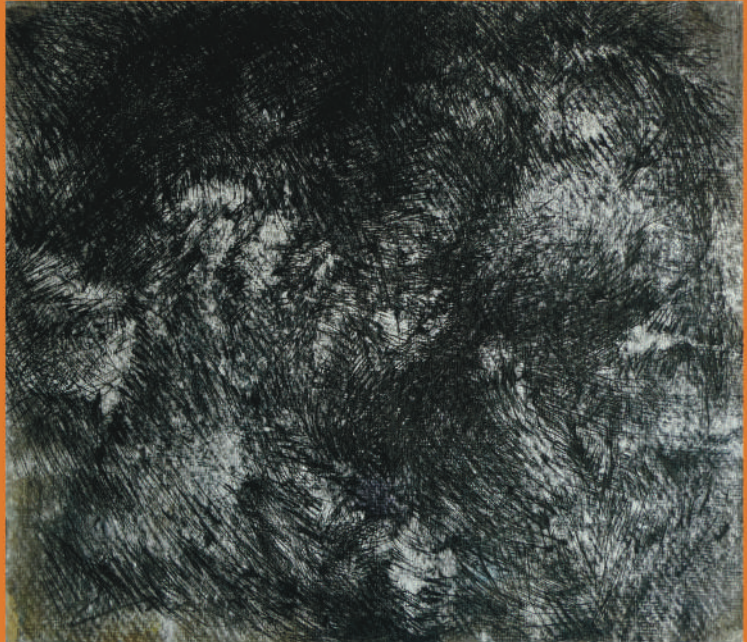




"There remains – for now – a more visible dance, one made luminously manifest, for instance, in Chantal Meza's series of paintings aptly named Apparitions, but elsewhere as well.

"Contrary to Foucault's account, one can easily observe that there is dancing there, accelerations and decelerations, traces or archives of the painter's dance, moments and movements of the spectator (of "the eye and the spirit," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has it), older animal dances ("who is beast?" Meza rightly asks as she paints), hunting dances, and also war dances, rehearsal and repetitions, vanishing stages of a pained evolution, of ossified or loosened, living and dying rituals, suspended metamorphoses, fleeting and conflicting scenes of a series in formation. States – and stages – of disappearance. Or dance".

Gil Anidjar



ARTIST STATEMENT

BY CHANTAL MEZA

I. If I was to say the truth; I am sure this wouldn't be the truth for others. And so, I find it senseless to bare my experiences on paper. And just because the people that need to know, know it, so to the rest I only give my creations, it is I think the less egotistical part of me.

The truth of my experience is in there, whether easy or difficult to translate, there is not much more I would like to write about my personal closeness to forced disappearance. I don't exist in the realm of words when it comes to express what my life lives. It is only abstract, and it is only visual, and I have long learned not to battle nor to question it. I cannot lose those hours of dwellings. How am I meant to express the meaning of my abstract paintings with words if the abstract is beyond the written language? If I need to write anything about force disappearances, I will have to stick to the study of it, not to its poetics, because I don't consider myself a writer, the same way I wouldn't call a Painter someone that can produce an image. Poetry in my ability stays within my paintings, that is how I see and how I live.

II. When does one begin to feel comfortable in life? Is comfort part of our denials or simply a kind of tiredness? The tiredness of suffering? You can be exposing yourself to guilt, one caused by the many problems in the world that will not stop following your steps.

Perhaps comfortableness is a type of abandonment and defeat, a fear of the consequences that, guided by ignorance or empathy, will be burst not only towards us but our closest ones.

Sometimes I wonder if my current comfort is due to all this? Or to the simple belief that I deserve happiness. A happiness, I realize cannot exist in the pain of the misfortune of others. And that is when I corner myself at one end, to contemplate, and perhaps that is why it might seem as if I am comfortable, that I've learned to escape, but the truth is that I'm only looking for the transformation of dreams. One gives the right to Time to fade away from memory what no longer requires entering, then, with life's own subtleties one gets involved into so many other things, in the many other important reasons of why to exist. So, you realize, or maybe not, that whatever was in there, no longer is. And yes, all of this will seem like an aside world, a very senile remorse. You breathe it no more because it barely appears as a sigh, and so there is no way to hold it. And although it doesn't disappear, you perceive it wondering in the fleeting flashes of light that escape in the blinks of your tramp.

I wonder if it is possible to forgive oneself of forgetting. And how does one know that the moment of oblivion has arrived? This is it. Its done. And then? Well, it seems that something else comes with the exposure, the exploration of the wounds, the spectacle of the suffering and the speech, the promulgation of the truths that one has found, the lies that one has hidden. Perhaps the answer to the peace of our sorrows comes with the ventilation of our penances, with the open mouth of wisdom or the bitter sarcasms of our pain. We could start selling our soul, the history of our experiences, in this way we redeem all the guilt that keeps us in this nauseating state among the crowds. But no, really, in there, we also find ourselves lost, more lost and entangled in the torments of our mind. We are fragmented in the air, what we do or say moves stealthily and slips into our interior and there we wrap ourselves; we feel again. It's just us, our figures standing in the heaviness of things.

III Where does the subject come from? Where will it find us? When? Do we go looking for it? Or is it just like a mist? Coming down from the mountain on a curious and even quiet walk? Who decides? The subject or us? Why our lives get entangled with certain stories?

IV. When one is no more than a passenger among the bitterness of others, being an impostor seems to be the first adjective that appears. The first steps that are intersected are perhaps stumbling blocks. Then we become a sort of magnet, we have attracted injustice to our feet.

V. This road has been nothing but a million questions for me. Every time this subject appears, I only see ahead a vein of palpitating paths that shouldn't be opened. The ones I have been able to open have been nothing more than torments, and if I have discovered something it has been a vast world of abstract images. I don't know if it is my way of seeing the world or that these abstract forms exist because that is how they are? As I have expressed on many other occasions, I have learned that this topic has taught me the power of the various ways of being silent, it has shown me the fear and fury of horror. I have understood the reasons for this stall, of the social paralysis, or a chosen oblivion with an apparent indifference, I have felt the rage that grows among all of us, in a Country that suffers the violence unleashed by a vile and chilling practice designed to paralyze groups of people. When life has been stripped away and you are left with nothing but broken and outraged pieces, it no longer matters to gnaw the soul out, shout it out to others, because the pain is so great and distressing that inside it only burns your days with innumerable misfortunes. And that's when you wonder, where has all this come from? To whom does one confronts if no one is there to give reasons why? To whom we should be bursting our grief if the guilty have also disappeared?

VI. Why not to catch in our words the meaninglessness of our certainties? To keep on finding a language that makes logic and poetry meet. The academic with its human rigor, and the poetic with its human outburst. Both are pure dynamite for the devastated soul, for our overwhelmed minds or simply for a whole. We could start by imagining ourselves on the line, guided by the weight of the void outside of it. Let's walk on the thin line, not only because it is a challenge for our intelligence and our senses, but because we can weave a thread that guides us like an umbilical cord does or like a root deep down in the earth, or maybe just like the misleading line of the mountain that we observe in the distance. That mountain that is not a traceable line, but a series of compacted life that rises and sustains through time. This is how perhaps how we can start to make two languages together something not so difficult to understand.

VII. Encountering the pain of those people who carry the crude bitterness of having a loved one disappeared or all those who accompany and encourage these families every day to move forward, to demand answers and redirect every second of anguish, it is a stab in the stomach, a dagger in the heart and a dark mist in the mind. I know very well that there is no end when trying to express how catastrophic this practice is, it doesn't seem to have an end point. But even if it did or, if there was a way that Art could capture in time what the State of Disappearance is, the meaning of its horror, to be able to express beyond words or shapes and colours, sounds and movements all its voids and damages to the soul, even then all this human expression seems an accumulation of gratification. Could you argue, perhaps, that this a way of dealing with it but with the ego on the side? Maybe, yes, and possibly, that is the small spline that opens up so we can communicate, to feel oneself a human with the other in such a way that the painful things are left out and we are only sustained on the others warmth heart... Is this enough?

VIII. I am still lost, and the circle keeps being bigger and bigger with every word and every stroke of paint. If one has been gifted and cursed, then one has to do its best. After all, pain is a big part of what constitutes life, a pain we provoke to each other with the things we invent and the problems we push out. If art is a human creation, then we have trapped ourselves into our own circular movements where the senses and the mind exist within billion vortexes that are chasing an escape. If we sometimes feel liberated it must be through the fugitive movements that trespass that vortex, but this is only to create another one, in here we will shelter back again with our ways of being.

So, I won't give an end, I will leave this open











"How can we memorialize what has been erased from memory? What are we to do when the voices of victims have been silenced, and when not only all meaningful speech but also any artistic figuration would say or show too much, misrepresenting the violent disappearance that has taken place in its very effort to represent it? How can we face the meaningless void that remains without either turning away or papering over it with sense-making sounds and shapes? The powerful paintings by Chantal Meza directly addresses this and force us to encounter what I venture to call "postfigurative im/memorial art."".

Bret Davies









"Life bleeds from the biosocial wounds etched ever more deeply into our social ecology, Chantal Meza writes. Ecofascism projects the most extreme eliminationist version of social disappearance. Proponents advocate for a white ethnostate, a racially homogeneous, ecologically pristine, and pure set-aside for an ecofascist order. The commitment is to help along the culling, to advance elimination by wiping out, sending away, or preventing the immigration of the racially unbelonging, those designated strangers within or trying to enter... As with her art, green here is bleached white, soaked in the red blood of others. Blood and soil, race and nature: the battle cry of the ecofascists".

David Theo Goldberg









THE INTIMATE WITNESS

INTERVIEW WITH CHANTAL MEZA & BRAD EVANS

BRAD EVANS: Not only does your art capture in a compelling way the raw passions and emotions of life, it also shows evident traces of life's pains, traumas, and its violence. As an emerging artist whose work is already being widely celebrated and recognized, why do these subjects command your attention?

CHANTAL MEZA: I turn my attention to what causes pain and suffering because I consider that life has to deal with these realities. Many things concern me as an artist. But I feel that when I paint, not only am I recognizing the pain, I am also able to expel it from me. It allows me to deal with the traumas of life. But I don't try to deal with this reasonably or rationally. Such coldness is often the cause of so much cruelty, anguish, and human devastation on this planet.

Countering pain through art demands paying close attention to the sensations that life offers. As Byron once said, "The great art of life is sensation, to feel that we exist, even in pain." It is to connect with something of the human in life, to absorb the world around us, and to master the explosion of emotions and to be able to download them in a pictorial way. Painting is a creative explosion as opposed to a devastating one.

But I have nevertheless still questioned my profession on many occasions. I am continuously burdened by the question of the usefulness of art. This has become more and more acute as I have tried connecting my work with realities in my country. Confronting injustice has brought about a dramatic change in how I see this land and the purpose of art. If I paint the horrors, the traumas, the violence, it is because I believe it hasn't been given proper attention. Art can bring light to that which is somehow occluded. And it allows us to dwell on widespread problems that are affecting us, slowly, gradually, and yet surely. There is still a profound indifference to social problems in this country. I find it terrifying to witness people's amazement when they see what is happening. It's as if they have been living in some trance, which denies any mutual responsibility. In order to improve social justice, there is always a need for a constant commitment in battle concerning how we see and relate to the world around us.

The best resources I can bring to the realities of social injustice and ongoing suffering are through my paintings. And I then try to let the work speak for itself. I am not interested in producing propaganda. I simply want to change perception and feeling, which is the real revolution, is it not?

I do appreciate sometimes it is more comfortable to ignore the plight of others. We can even, as societies, reduce terrifying events to pitiful facts in ways that ultimately absolve us of any need to fight them. This has everything to do with individualism, which in contemporary Mexico is so deep in our subconscious, that when we are now faced with the suffering of others, it is removed from any sense of obligation. We know the pain is there, yet refuse to acknowledge it unless it becomes our problem and concern. This is a form of exclusion – a retreat into our own mental universe that leads to the greatest selfishness.

Like many countries, Mexico is a land full of contradictions. Why do you think the arts have an important political and social function for people there today?

In Mexico, as you say, the contradictions are so apparent, its pain and poverty, its love and terror, its color and despair. It can be beautiful and monstrous at the very same time. But Mexico is not unique in this regard. Certainly Mexico has its own distinct history and culture. And it retains its unique magical resonances. But humans are full of contradictions. And so the things they create can be contradictory. We can produce tanks and nuclear bombs and we can produce the most inspiring works of art and cultural outputs. Art is a human creation. And it is something I like to consider as divine. I don't mean divine here in an orthodox religious sense. Though it is certainly spiritual. I like to think of art as being something that allows us to tap into those human qualities that are often difficult to put into words. Hence, while the work might be abstract it is not abstracting. Just because something appears abstract doesn't mean to say it's not real or doesn't connect in a meaningful way to people's everyday lives. It is messy, complicated, and disrupting, because life is messy, complicated, and disrupting, especially once we factor in our emotions.

Let's just take the human capacity for empathy, for example, which I would argue is one of the fundamental ethical values and qualities of art. Art is about showing empathy for the suffering of the world. As a tool of expression, it confronts in its own unique way those intrinsic qualities that exalt and raise in an unusual fashion the events that have shaped our society throughout its history. Just as we might talk about Mexico being profoundly shaped by its wars and revolutions, we can also talk about its artistic transformations, from early indigenous artisans, the Mexican Baroque, the great muralists such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, onto more contemporary forms of artistic expression that arguably began with Frida Kahlo. All of these artists have changed the inner and outer qualities of Mexican life. They have also shown the extent to which art talks about social and political issues. It can put on the walls issues that are lived on a daily basis, and in doing so expose people in alternative ways to problems that can generate dialogue. Knowing problems exist is one thing. Talking about them is another. And this is the challenge modern Mexico faces.

You've mentioned having self-doubts about the relevance of art when confronting violence. How would you counter criticism of art as being self-indulgent or complicit in the logics of power? And can art truly lead to profound political transformation?

It depends what we mean by transformation. It is difficult to see art changing established structures of power. And I am not so naïve to think a painting can solve crimes against humanity, whether they take place in Mexico or anywhere else on this planet. But let's not forget the importance of art in documenting historical atrocities. And let's not also forget that painting is a language, it is my language, through which I am able to think and rethink, to criticize and propose, to question and reframe difficult social issues and their legacies. Art in this context is not about retreating into one's studio or exhibition hall, as much as writing is not about simply being sat at a lonely desk or to be subsequently read quietly in the peaceful and tranquil setting of a library. If art has any meaning, its presence must be felt on the streets and in the homes. In this regard,

would argue that what art can reflect, at its best, is the awareness we have an enormous potential to transform without doing harm and that we have the real and tangible capacity to recreate this reality. Art can be the counterweight to violence. It is the poetry of nature. In order to change things for the better, we need to believe transformation is possible. This can only be achieved by overcoming states of inertia, which paints us in an image of mere nothingness, helplessness. Art shows the human in a state of elevation, where its potential rises, and spreads through its creations something as amazing as nature itself. This is why the natural world so illuminates me.

To conclude, I'd like to ask you about the current State of Disappearance project, which we started developing (as a result of numerous conversations about your work) and which invariably addresses violence head-on. Why do you think it's important for artists to deal with disappearance and what message do you hope the work will communicate?

If art is to deal with the question of violence, then it must confront the kidnappings, femicides, repressions, clandestine graves, enforced disappearances, the murders of journalists, extrajudicial executions, as well as the indifference to such horrifying crimes. More insidious than state brutality, this type of violence I find truly terrifying, especially as a woman who lives in a society where such violence is endemic. I really believe it is essential to generate a critical discussion and insist upon new approaches to these pressing issues.

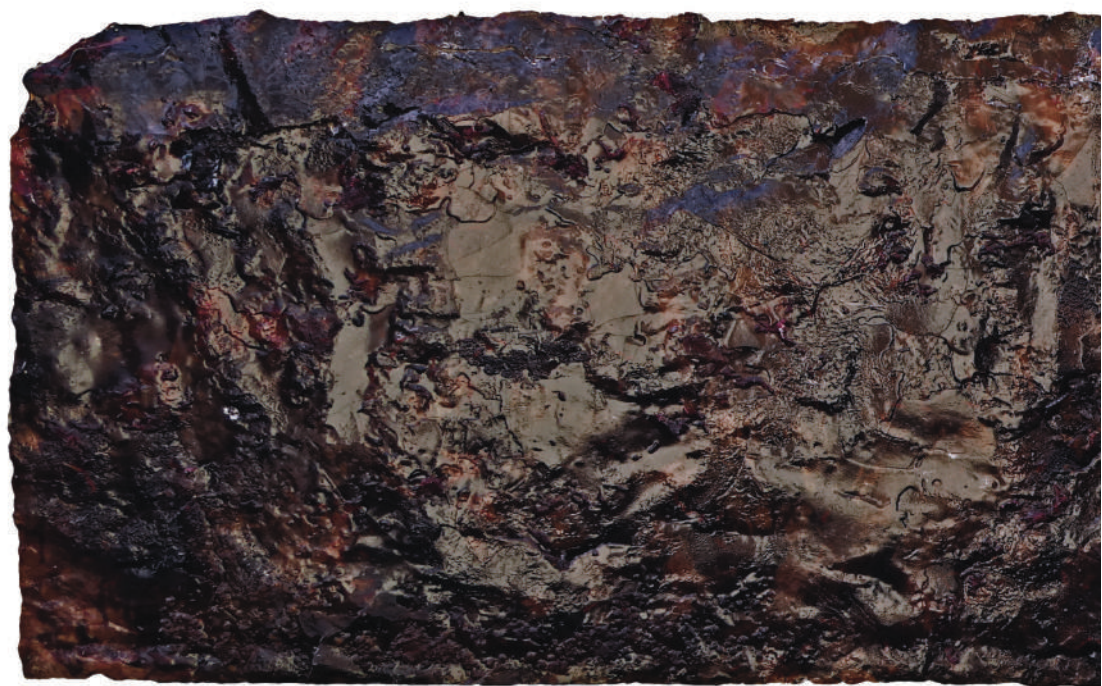
The main concern for me is to deal with the relationship between the viewer, the perpetrator, and the victim. How can we witness something that is beyond witnessing? And through this we might ask: How do people end up in that position of vulnerability? Are we only spectators to these crimes in the absence of their physical presence? And to what extent could we help by trying to recover something of the memory of the victims by producing new visual testimonies, which dignify their existence?

Elena Poniatowska recently said, "Maybe you want to write a love novel with lots of kisses and you wake up with a lot of enthusiasm to do it, but you find that last night 43 students were disappeared, or they killed people in a colony, etc. There is such a terrible reality that also pulls you to the street, that you feel that reality comes to your house and annihilates you." Daily violence insists that you have to address these issues. It requires turning your gaze and looking no matter how horrifying that reality is, because then we can offer solidarity with those people who have needlessly suffered. Once we are aware of these states of terror, it is possible to ignore the circumstances or deny their existence. I want to convey the thunderous cry, which echoes the devastation many are feeling, and try to awaken others with its call. This is where I truly believe art can do something positive. For what is art if not an ethically and empathetically considered testimony to the idea that we are born as collective individuals, who, forced to confront the pain of existence, still retain something magical in how we make sense of the world.

A more expanded version of this interview was originally published in the Los Angeles Review of Books, October, 2018.

"But where the substance of what is being described is not unambiguously identifiable with an object, as in most of Chantal Meza's artworks, appearance and disappearance are difficult to separate or distinguish – for the what has become ambiguous. Something is shown in the work, but it is difficult to say just what that something is. In this situation, what is shown does not simply appear; rather, it disappears but without vanishing or leaving a total void. In this respect, it participates in what I have elsewhere described as the triad of visibility, invisibility, and divisibility – a triad that tries to take into account the convergence and nonexclusivity of appearing and disappearing based on the intrinsic divisibility of signifiers, visual as well as verbal and acoustic."

Samuel Weber





PAST & FUTURE

**What has been revealed
What will be returned to dust**





Looking back on my life, my work, I now see that the questions of appearance and disappearance have always been casting uncertain shadow and darkness across the landscapes I sought to bring into the world. One of my earliest pieces, which I elected to show at the solo exhibition in Bristol titled "Kronos", spoke directly to the question of time and the memory of our forgetting. Others have dealt with unhealed wounds and traumas, which scar the body with unseen traces long after a violation has been felt or experienced. What is particular to the Kronos work is the use of a technique that involves a certain material that will naturally decompose the paint over time. The artwork that stands before the viewer was made to slowly vanish over time, just as every God that claims some eternal presence slowly fades before our eyes. This pointed to a slower disappearance, within time, and one that even affected the very god of time who was not immune to its logics and violence.





More recently, however, my work has taken a different turn. The more I engaged with disappearance the more I understood how the forces that render life meaningless were assuming novel and more deadly forms. There was an increased speed to the violence, which was now being enabled by a runaway digital world.

What strangely brought everything into focus, the need to overexpose everything, was capable of disappearing life at lightening speeds. Digitalisation and reach of technology, I have seen, is not about emancipation. It's actually leading to the disappearance of the aesthetic, which is also inseparable from the potential disappearance of art as the power of technocratic thinking has become a new religion. This is a future struggle my work is already seeking to work against. A struggle for the integrity of art in the face of its annihilation.

Chantal Meza, September, 2023.





"In many regions of the Americas where these Africans disembarked, they replaced the Native American populations who prior to them were enslaved and killed. Meza's series *The Void* reminds us of the ambiguous nature of these spaces that were destroyed and whose peoples were dispossessed. Spaces that were new to enslaved Africans but not at all empty for the Indigenous populations who had been in the Americas for thousands of years. Colourless, the drawings in *The Void* evoke what these new spaces were and what they would become. Gradually, the series *Apparitions* takes shape from the vacant black and white networks of blurry lines to become a mass of detailed round shapes. Hair. Heads. Pubic hair. Movement. A new life is possible. But one that is not free of blood and violence."

Ana Lucia Araujo

INDEX

Cover image: Obscure Beasts IX. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018.

Back cover image: Obscure Beasts I. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018.

Artworks in Order of Appearance:

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe III. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.4)

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe VI. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.4)

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe VIII. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.5)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts X. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.5)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts V. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.7)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts III. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.8)

Chantal Meza. The Void no's I-IV. Graphite & Charcoal on paper. 29.5 x 42 cm. 2019 (p.9)

Chantal Meza. The Void IX. Graphite & Charcoal on paper. 29.5 x 42 cm. 2019 (p.10)

Chantal Meza. The Void no's V-VIII. Graphite & Charcoal on paper. 29.5 x 42 cm. 2019 (p.11)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts VII. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.12)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts VIII. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.13)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts II. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 86 cm. 2018 (p.14-15)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts IV. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.16)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts VI. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.16)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts IV. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.17)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts II. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.18)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts XI. Mixed media on paper. 115 x 96 cm. 2018 (p.18)

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe no's I, II, IV, V, IX, VII, XI, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.19)

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe no's XIX, XXI, XVIII. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.20)

Chantal Meza. Obscure Beasts XI. Mixed media on paper. 100 x 86 cm. 2018 (p.21)

Chantal Meza. Since the Beginning. Mixed media on paper. 200 x 200cm. 2019 (p.23)

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe no's XX, XII. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.26)

Chantal Meza. Fragments of a Catastrophe no's XII, XXII. Mixed media on paper. 25 x 20 cm. 2018 (p.27)

Chantal Meza. The Void X. Graphite & Charcoal on paper. 29.5 x 42 cm. 2019 (p.31)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's XVII, XX, IV, XVIII. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.32)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's V, VI, VII, XXI. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.33)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's XXIX, XXVII, XXVIII. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.34)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions I. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.35)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's X, XI, XII, XIII. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.36)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's XIV, XV, XVI, XIX. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.37)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions IX. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.38)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions II. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.39)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's XXII, XXIV. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.40)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions no's XXIII, XXV, XXVI. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.41)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions VIII. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.42)

Chantal Meza. Apparitions III. Ink on paper. 35 x 27 cm. 2017 (p.43)

Chantal Meza. Collapse of Consciousness. Resin, ink, charcoal, fiberglass, pastel & acrylic on paper. 3.28 x 1.10 meters. 2020 (p.48-49)

Chantal Meza. Get Away. Oil on Canvas. 80 x 50cm. 2013. Donation to Life Art Foundation, Mexico City (p.51)

Chantal Meza. Kronos. Oil on Canvas. 180 x 150cm. 2009. (p.52-53)

Chantal Meza. Genesis. Oil on Wood. 45 x 45cm. 2017. Public Collection, Zacatecas, Mexico (p.54)

Chantal Meza. Visceral Ecologies no. XIX. Oil on Canvas. 60 x 46cm. 2020 (p.54)

Chantal Meza. Details, Mirrors of the Void. Mixed Media on Canvas Banner. 5m x 10 m. 2018. Public collection, CCU - BUAP, Puebla, Mexico (p.55)

THANKS

The State of Disappearance project has been a collaborative response that has brought together the arts, humanities, social sciences and wider advocacy groups to bring new attention to the multiple ways disappearance occurs. Instigating public debate, it has asked what forced absence and total human denial means for societies and how we might better understand such violence in the 21st Century?

As with any sustained project of this kind, it owes too much to too many people who have helped along the way. While they can't all be listed here, Chantal would like to offer a special dedication to her parents, Alvaro Meza Hernandez & Armida C. Villanueva Rojas. Los quiero mis viejitos; gracias por todo. Both Chantal and Brad Evans would also like to extend their considerable thanks and appreciation to all those authors and interlocutors who they have engaged with us along the way, including those who contributed to the edited book we put together, along with those who have invited us to speak about disappearance in Mexico, the United States, United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Germany and elsewhere. All of these encounters improved our understanding considerably. Thanks should also be extended to the speakers who have joined us on the journey, including those who featured in the Centrespace gallery in Bristol as we sought to rethink the multiple ways disappearance occurs.

The project has benefitted from the ongoing support of many funding partners and supporting organisations to which we are grateful. These include the Arts Council England National Lottery; the Centre for the Study of Violence, University of Bath; ESRC Festival of Social Sciences; the Global Insecurities Centre, University of Bristol; the Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath; the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame; and Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution. It has also been partnered by Bristol Ideas; Locate International; Trebuchet Art Magazine; and The Philosopher, which have been vital to how we have been able to engage publics on such a difficult issue.

Finally, a word of friendship and admiration needs to be sent to those families, friends, loved ones and organisations who are fighting for justice for the disappeared across the world. We cannot imagine what so many go through as the unspeakable becomes a reality. What we can do, in our own humble ways, is to try and keep on trying to never forget.

Chantal Meza
Brad Evans

Project Directors

STATE OF DISAPPEARANCE ART EXHIBITION

IS PROUDLY SPONSORED &
SUPPORTED BY THE
FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS

SPONSORS



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Centre for the
Study of Violence



**Economic
and Social
Research Council**



**KROC INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE STUDIES**



Bath Royal
Literary and Scientific Institution

Centre for
Death & Society
(CDAS)



**University of
BRISTOL**

Global Insecurities Centre

MEDIA



TREBUCHET



PARTNERS

LQ CATE
INTERNATIONAL



The
**ART WAREHOUSE
LIMITED**
and
FRAMING FACTORY

This Catalogue was printed by the University of Bath Printing Services and produced with the support of the Economic and Social Research Council Festival of Social Sciences.
Printed October, 2023.
300 Copies.



Printed October, 2023.
300 Copies
£8.00

University of Bath Printing Services
Economic and Social Research Council
United Kingdom