

# ERIKA DIETTES

ARTISTA VISUAL - VISUAL ARTIST

*“There is now a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain [a] kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing - may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget.”*

SUSAN SONTAG

Regarding the Pain of Others 2003<sup>1</sup>

## *Intimations of Mor(t)ality*

SUDARIOS (*SHROUDS*)  
BY ERIKA DIETTES

Dr. Marcus Bunyan

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WHEN I WAS ASKED TO WRITE THE CATALOGUE ESSAY ON Colombian artist Erika Diettes' work *Sudarios (Shrouds)* by editor Esther Gyorki for the Ballarat International Foto Biennale the work gave me pause. What could I say about it that was relevant, insightful and spoke from the heart? I wrote back to Esther saying I needed to do some background research: “*This is difficult subject matter and I want to make sure I can do it justice before I commit to writing about it.*”<sup>2</sup> In a synchronous way that often happens in the world, that is ultimately what this text is about - justice.

The basics are easily told. Artist and anthropologist Erika Diettes travelled to Medellin (a city that has one of the highest rates of violence and is home to one of the biggest drug cartels in Colombia) to interview women who had been present at the torture and murder of their loved ones. Diettes photographed the women, closely cropped in black and white, at a moment of great vulnerability - all but one with their eyes closed. The resultant twenty photographs were printed on seven feet tall silk panels and form the work *Sudarios* (shrouds are a burial

cloak, a cloth that shrouds the body of the deceased). The artist always intended for these images to be printed on silk and had the installation in mind before she took the photographs: in other words previsualisation was strong. The work is usually displayed in sacred spaces such as churches and convents with a sound track of a barely audible, sighing female voice; here in Ballarat the work is hung in the former Mining Exchange building, a seat of colonial power and wealth which can be read as appropriate for the presentation of this work, for torture is always about the power of one person over another. The viewer can walk through these floating realities and be enfolded in the aggrieved women's sorrow as if part of a ceremonial procession, perhaps a funeral cortege.

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In her creation of an allegorical space for mourning, Diettes work acts as a funeral rite for both living and dead, acts of mourning placed in a context of splendour. The images evoke the representation of the death of Saint Sebastian, the faces recalling "*the exquisite suffering of the Catholic saints and martyrs, but also of refugees and victims of contemporary traumas,*"<sup>3</sup> while the atrocities perpetrated on the body are hidden by the close cropping of the images. As Diettes observes, "You can't help being a little pierced by their exhalations,"<sup>4</sup> an indirect reference by Diettes to the arrows that pierce Saint Sebastian's body. Diettes opens a space before the camera for the human 'being' in context, a terrain (of) or *becoming*, where the terrors are written on the countenance of the women, their mouths silently singing their song of mourning. Look at their mouths, each one contorted in agony, each one giving voice to the memory of terror.

These are confronting images about trauma and grief, documenting the ongoing effects of atrocity on the mind of the observer for they are portrayals of the effect of intim(id)ation, where intimations of mortality are

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evidenced by the removal of an identity, the beloved id, which reveals the intimate - expressed in the adoration/adornment of the women with jewellery which signifies the women's dignity, comfort, and continuing engagement with the world as an extension of personal self/belief.

The signs of erasure of these murders are rearticulated through Diettes work. The bodies are held in suspended animation, in endless agony, through an act of re-territorialization. Through the evacuation of loved ones, their discontinuity and deterritorialization, and the reterritorialization / re-terroring of that space through memory - portrayed on the faces of the women - the images recast and represent issues of power, domination and abuse. Through suspended sorrow, suspended mourning, the disappearance of some bodies and the speaking of others, the images become a representation of a doubled absence, a doubled *momenti mori* - for the photographs picture the women (making them dead) as they themselves remember the violence perpetrated before them from behind closed eyes (as the dead have their eyes closed), remembering in their mind's eye the death of the beloved. The image of the victim has become a ghost, a trace etched upon the face of the relative, a trace of that which "persists and gives testimony of a vanished state" in art, for if art is linked to memory and to what survives, it is from the perspective of its own corpse-oreality, its own ghostly and fragile materiality that these images emerge: the hanged man, the hung woman. Remaking but always recording the past through interaction with the present, the shrouds are a palimpsest in which "*personal memories are always interwoven with historical consciousness*"<sup>5</sup> and are constantly being rewritten.

Of course the photographs elicit our empathy but more than that they make us feel their terrible vulnerability while drawing us into uncomfortable complicity as

subsidiary witnesses to the event.<sup>6</sup> Normally when looking at a photograph the viewer is a secondary witness but here the viewer becomes a tertiary witness – the actual event, the memory of that event etched on the face of the women captured by the camera and now observed by the viewer. There is an osmotic effect taking place as one as one image is super imposed on another. Even after an event is over, “*there’s an after image or an echo that exists... a spirit or a residue, a trace.*”<sup>7</sup> These visions are like images of the Holocaust. As soon as we see them we are implicated in a narrative – and we are helpless in this process – which is an essential part of history.

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Diettes work reframes the subject because there is no traditional frame of reference for the viewer, only a memory of that reference in the form of a ghost-like shroud. The normal definition of a shroud no longer pertains to these images for the cloth is no longer around a dead body but represents / holds a trace of what was once dead.

As spirit photographs in the Victorian era solidified a fractured, unknown reality, so these apparitions of the departed are brought forth and solidified, just for a moment, in the faces of the suffering women. The viewer of these images does not see the (dead) carrier of messages, but only their shadows carried by the grief of their loved ones, shrouded as they are in remembrances of the past. We feel that the women are not looking at us but that the aura of their invisible seeing is directed toward us from outside of its normative context – from behind their eyes. It is this imprint on the *Shrouds*; the imprint of their memories that travels great distances towards us, that enfolds us in sorrow and shadow.

*“It is the special feeling of the ‘presence’ of a work produced not by its remaining where it is but by its moving across boundaries where it reaches us from a distance,*

*looking at us even when it appears not to. It is where the work seems peculiarly meant for us even in its indifference to or difference from us.”<sup>8</sup>*

If photographs really are “experience captured” then Diettes explores this arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood,<sup>9</sup> probing the limitation of the medium, shaping the space within the available conditions. Her images become images of sentience that enable the viewer to live in the world with open eyes (while the victims eyes are closed) - to be made aware of the injustices of this world and not remain silent. Diettes work is not about remembering, *it’s about an answerable “not forgetting”* for hers... is to remind us of the responsibility to make art in response to mor(t)ality.

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As human beings, we must fight for the right to be heard and use art as a visual language to textualise our experience and thereby make it available for interpretation and closure. Powerful, simple questions (and I believe) undeniable questions have to be asked; and in response to those questions (power: it will corrupt you, but if you don’t want it, it will be used against you), intelligence, justice and integrity must be used in the service of art. While human truth may be ephemeral qualities like justice are not; the struggle is to define justice and to live it. And for artists to display it.

You place innocence at the heart of human depravity - and hope it survives. ♦

Dr Marcus Bunyan  
May 2013

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- 2 Email to Esther Gyorki. Tue, March 26, 2013
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- 4 Diettes, Erika quoted in Tobón, Paola Cardona. “The exhalation of sorrow,” in El Colombiano, November 4, 2012 [Online] Cited Cited May 5, 2013. [erikadiettes.com/links/prensa/houston/02\\_ExhalationOfSorrow\\_ElColombiano\\_v2.pdf](http://erikadiettes.com/links/prensa/houston/02_ExhalationOfSorrow_ElColombiano_v2.pdf)
- 5 Garb, Tamar. “A Land of Signs,” in Journal of Contemporary African Art 26, Spring 2010, p.11.
- 6 Op. cit. “Berlinde De Bruyckere Into One-Another To P.P.P.”
- 7 Rakes, Rachael and Goldsmith, Leo. “Pasolini’s Body: Cathy Lee Crane with Leo Goldsmith and Rachael Rakes,” on The Brooklyn Rail website. January 13, 2013 [Online] Cited May 5, 2013. [www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/film/pasolinis-body-cathy-lee-crane-with-leo-goldsmith-rachael-rakes](http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/film/pasolinis-body-cathy-lee-crane-with-leo-goldsmith-rachael-rakes)
- 8 Butler, Rex. ““Lines”, Leading Out of Sight?: Is Aboriginal Art Losing its Aura?” in Australian Art Collector No. 13, July-September 2000, p.87.
- 9 Campany, David. “Photography and Photographs,” on the Still Searching blog. April 14, 2013 [Online] Cited May 11, 2013. [blog.fotomuseum.ch/2013/04/1-photography-and-photographs/#more-1282](http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2013/04/1-photography-and-photographs/#more-1282)

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