

FONDATION BEYELER

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**DORIS SALCEDO**

Cover:

*Untitled*, 1998 (detail)

Wood en armoire with glass, concrete, steel, and clothing

183.52 cm × 99.38 cm × 30.8 cm

Installation view, Pérez Art Museum, Miami, Florida, 2016

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Lisa and John Miller

© the artist. Photo: David Heald

**DORIS SALCEDO**

**21 May – 17 September 2023**

## INTRODUCTION

This exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler is the first museum show in Switzerland devoted to internationally acclaimed Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (\*1958). The extensive selection of works ties in with her installation *Palimpsest* (2013–2017), which has been on view at the Fondation Beyeler since October 2022.

In her objects, sculptures and large-scale site-specific interventions, the Bogotá-born artist addresses the experiences and repercussions of violent conflicts. The rich diversity of Salcedo's practice is manifest in her wide range of materials: from stone and concrete to everyday objects such as wooden furniture, clothing and needles, as well as transient materials such as grass, water, flower petals and human hair. By means of unusual associations of objects and combinations of seemingly contradictory materials meticulously worked by hand, Salcedo manages to portray violence and suffering without showing them explicitly. The evocative titles of her works, oftentimes referring to poetry, endow them with an additional, verbal plane of meaning.

Even though her works often take specific events as their starting point, their reach is universal: her artistic practice centres on cross-cultural emotions and sensations such as compassion, grief or alienation as well as our handling of the ever-repeating cycle of forgetting and remembering.

The exhibition has been conceived in close cooperation with the artist. It is curated by Sam Keller, Director, and Fiona Hesse, Associate Curator, Fondation Beyeler.

## BIOGRAPHY

Doris Salcedo was born in 1958 in Bogotá, Colombia, where she still lives and works today. She studied painting and art history at the Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, then sculpture at New York University. In 1985, she returned to Colombia, undertaking numerous fieldwork journeys across her country to meet survivors and relatives of victims of brutality and violence. Her resulting awareness of and sensitisation to the themes of war, alienation, displacement and disorientation have informed her work ever since.

Time and again, Salcedo's works have captured widespread attention. In *Shibboleth* at Tate Modern in London in 2007, a deep crack in the floor ran the length of the large Turbine Hall, allowing social segregation and exclusion to be experienced in spatial terms. At the 8th International Istanbul Biennial in 2003, Salcedo presented *Untitled*, stacking around 1500 wooden chairs to fill a space left vacant between two buildings in the city by the expulsion of Armenian and Jewish families. Her most recent work, *Uprooted* (2020–2022), which addresses climate change and its attendant migratory flows, was recently awarded the Sharjah Biennial 15 Prize. Doris Salcedo is also the recipient of the first Nomura Art Award and the Possehl Prize for International Art (both 2019), the Rolf Schock Prize for Visual Arts (2017) and the Nasher Prize (2015). Her works are held in the collections of prestigious museums such as the Tate in London, MoMA in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

## ROOM 1

### 1 **Untitled, 1989–2014**

Steel, plaster, cotton shirts and animal tissue

Rows of metal bed frames and stacks of folded white shirts create an atmosphere evocative of a hospice or a hospital. The bed frames are wrapped in animal skin as though in wound dressing material, some with tightly rolled shirts bandaged onto them. The stacked shirts are stiffened with plaster and speared through at breast level by long metal rods – a symbolic gesture of violence exerted against the absent human bodies.

The starting point for Doris Salcedo's striking sculptural ensemble was her research into a > **massacre** of plantation workers in Colombia. Usually, pieces of clothing and the traces they bear constitute important evidence when investigating crimes. Here, however, they are stripped of their individuality, made uniform, anonymous and interchangeable. Read as such, the lined up stacks of varying heights recall the affectless official recording of a death count.

NOTE: More detailed BACKGROUND INFORMATION on the terms printed in **bold** and marked with an arrow > is provided at the back of the exhibition guide.

## ROOM 2

### 2 A Flor de Piel II, 2013–2014

Rose petals and surgical thread

Petal upon petal, *A Flor de Piel* spreads out in soft waves across the floor. Minutely sewn together by hand using surgical thread and chemically preserved, the petals of thousands of roses appear to hover in a state between life and death. They are so fragile that they risk tearing at the merest touch – an image of the frailty of human existence.

The title of the work goes back to a Spanish expression used to describe the reaction to an emotionally overwhelming situation, which in English would approximately translate to “on edge”, “raw”. Formally and chromatically, the work brings to mind associations of human skin or even flesh. The act of stitching embodied in the piece, a gesture both caring and hurtful, triggers ambivalent feelings.

This work was conceived in the context of Doris Salcedo’s research into the life of a Colombian nurse who was abducted and tortured to death. *A Flor de Piel* thus also evokes the shroud and the funeral rites that the > **disappeared** was denied.



## ROOM 3

### 3 **Plegaria Muda, 2008–2010**

Wood, earth, concrete, metal and grass

This room-filling installation raises the ground up into our field of vision – grass is sprouting from the layers of earth spread between the inversely stacked pairs of tables. The measurements of the plain, handmade pieces of furniture echo those of a human body. The tables' material and their uniformity call to mind coffins, lined up as in a burial ground.

*Plegaria Muda* – which translates as “silent prayer” – is rooted in Doris Salcedo's engagement with the fate of young victims of deadly violence, in the context of both gang crime in Los Angeles and a series of murders carried out by the Colombian army against supposed **> guerrilla fighters**. The work mentions no names, hauntingly echoing the anonymity of mass graves; yet the vibrant green of the grass operates as a hopeful reminder that new life can spring up even in the most gruesome places.

## ROOM 4

### 4 *Atrabiliarios*, 1992–2004

Shoes, drywall, paint, wood, fiber tissue and surgical thread

Empty boxes, made from translucent, parchment-like material, are stacked on the gallery floor. A series of niches have been embedded in the walls, their openings covered with stretched animal skin that blurs their contents: shoes, presented either single or in pairs. The shoe stands in for the human body, operating as a trace of the person whose foot once shaped it. As an isolated item, it symbolises loss – its own or that of its owner. The title of the series, *Atrabiliarios*, derives from the Latin “*atra bilis*”, used to describe the melancholy associated with mourning.

Over a number of years, Doris Salcedo gathered shoes belonging to **> disappeared persons**. Even though their personal stories remain undisclosed, the reliquary-like display emphasises the special significance of the individual. The protective membrane stitched to the wall with surgical thread elicits contradictory associations: the caring act of tending to a wound also amounts to a violent aggression of the skin, the object’s protection doubles as its concealment.

## ROOM 5

### **5 Untitled, 1989–2016**

Wooden furniture, concrete, steel, clothing

This gathering of furniture uncannily deconstructs familiar environments. Wardrobes and beds, tables and chairs are ripped from their usual constellations and thrown into new combinations that render them impossible to use. Partly shoved into one another, their cavities filled with concrete, some of them contain items of clothing once worn and kept there but now forever still and petrified. They offer only vague memories of the individuals who will never again sit on those chairs and sleep in those beds, and whose absence the work makes tangible. The installation's disquieting effect is heightened by the fact that the objects are no longer in relation to the dimensions of their former domestic environment: in the vast expanse of the gallery, they appear isolated and exposed. The traces of wear on the wooden surfaces are evocative of wrinkles and scars. They call to mind the wounded state of families broken apart, such as those Doris Salcedo met over the course of her research into political violence.

## ROOM 6

### **6 Disremembered, 2020–2021**

Sewing needles and silk thread

Four almost transparent blouses of loosely woven silk thread hang on the walls. Depending on the viewer's vantage point and the light's angle of incidence, the delicate material gains or loses in visibility. Closer examination reveals thousands of needles worked into the fabric. The impression of almost immaterial lightness thus fuses with an intuition of harrowing, unrelenting pain.

This group of works expresses Doris Salcedo's engagement with the grief and anguish of mothers in Chicago who have lost their only child to local gun violence. Reminded daily of their agonising loss, they often experience incomprehension and impatience from a society longing for pleasure and oblivion.

## ROOM 7

### **7 Palimpsest, 2013–2017**

Ground marble, resin, corundum, sand, water, hydraulic equipment

Emptiness dominates in the exhibition's largest room. Crossing the threshold, our gaze falls to the floor, which is covered in large rectangular stone slabs. Names are written on the slabs in dark sand. Overlapping with them, water wells up in drops to form letters that combine into further names before seeping away again. Although written in Latin script, the names attest to a rootedness in languages hailing from outside Europe.

The work's title *Palimpsest* refers to the practice of writing, erasing and overwriting text on animal skin prior to the invention of paper. In this context, writing is a time-bound, transient endeavour, and yet shadows of earlier words always remain visible.

*Palimpsest* is dedicated to those who lost their lives fleeing across the sea in search of a better life in Europe. The installation allows for a commemoration and remembrance they would otherwise be denied because their lives do not count in Europe and their names are nowhere recorded. The artist has spent several years painstakingly researching these names and is bringing them to our awareness with this image of a "weeping earth".

## ROOM 8

### **8 Unland: the orphan's tunic, 1997**

Wooden tables, silk, human hair, thread

As though orphaned, three long wooden tables stand in the otherwise empty space. Looking more closely, it becomes apparent that they are assembled from two different table halves partly slotted on top of each other. In *Unland: the orphan's tunic*, the shorter part is clad in white silk that crosses over to the other part, where it is sewn to the wood with countless stitches of human hair. The impression thus created is that the upper table half is attempting to hold the bottom half. It is uncertain whether the connection could withstand an ordinary load. The subtitle *the orphan's tunic* quotes from the English translation of a poem by > **Paul Celan**, in which the garment materialises the emotional connection between the living and the dead. The sculpture is rooted in Doris Salcedo's encounter with an orphaned child who had witnessed the murder of her parents during the > **Colombian civil war** and had ever since worn the same white gown sewn by her mother.

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## **9 Feedback Board**

Encountering Doris Salcedo's sculptures and installations may trigger a wide array of thoughts and feelings. The Feedback Board provides an opportunity to express your reactions and share them with fellow museum visitors.

ONLINE

**10 NAH DRAN (Close) – Voices in a context of crisis, displacement and settling in**

A Fondation Beyeler podcast

On the occasion of the installation *Palimpsest* (ROOM 7), the podcast “NAH DRAN – Voices in a context of crisis, displacement and settling in” conveys personal perspectives onto the themes addressed in the artwork.

In conversations with Basel-based journalist Naomi Gregoris, people involved in various initiatives in the region share their stories. They support people living in areas of crisis and conflict, fleeing their homeland or attempting to gain a foothold in Europe. The podcast provides insights into their daily activities and experiences in a context of crisis, displacement and settling in.

All episodes can be accessed online.

Language: German

Duration: around 7 minutes each

Production: Simon Meyer Podcastproduktion.ch

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### **Colombian civil war**

From 1964, a civil war in Colombia opposed left-wing revolutionary guerrilla groups, right-wing paramilitary units and the state military, police and domestic intelligence services. The conflict was rooted in the 1948 assassination of the leader of the Liberal Party Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and the subsequent period of “La Violencia”, a bloody ten-year battle for influence between the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. The persistent economic oppression of the rural population led to the establishment of peasant guerrilla groups in the 1960s. In the 1980s, paramilitary groups formed. Both sides cooperated with drug cartels to fund their activities. In 2000, the “Plan Colombia” saw the deployment of the Colombian and US armies to fight drug cultivation.

According to the Comisión de la Verdad (Truth Commission), the conflict has claimed 500,000 lives. Up to eight million people have suffered displacement. In 2005, the state-led disarmament of paramilitary groups rang in a phase of transition. An important step toward peace was taken with the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the guerrilla group FARC-EP, which led to the latter’s disarmament.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### **Paul Celan**

Doris Salcedo's work draws inspiration from philosophy and poetry. Several of her works' titles refer to the words of Paul Celan. The German-language poet was born in 1920 in a Jewish family in Chernivtsi, at the time part of Romania. While his parents were both killed in concentration camps, Celan survived the Shoah by fleeing a forced labour camp. He settled in Paris, teaching German language and literature, and translating works by poets such as Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Emily Dickinson, Arthur Rimbaud, Antonin Artaud and Charles Baudelaire. The defining forces of Celan's own work are a reflection on the German language and the question of the possibility of communication after the experience of the Shoah. Paul Celan took his own life in 1970.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the title of her work *Unland: the orphan's tunic*, Doris Salcedo quotes from **Paul Celan's** poem *Night Rode Him* (1968).

Night rode him, he had come to his senses,  
the orphan's tunic was his flag,

no more going astray,  
it rode him straight –

It is, it is as though oranges hung in the privet,  
as though the so-ridden had nothing on  
but his  
first  
birth-marked, se-  
cret-speckled  
skin.

*(Translated by Michael Hamburger and  
Christopher Middleton)*

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### **Guerrilla fighters**

Colombia's largest guerrilla group were the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo = Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army). The social-revolutionary organisation was founded in 1964 and had ever since been engaged in an armed conflict with the Colombian state, right-wing paramilitary groups and drug cartels. In the wake of the 2016 peace agreement, the FARC surrendered their weapons.

### **Massacres**

Colombia's history is riven with massacres perpetrated by paramilitary units, guerrilla groups and the military against strikers and alleged political opponents in the civilian population. As early as 1928, General Carlos Cortés Vargas ordered the shooting of striking workers on banana plantations belonging to the American United Fruit Company.

Doris Salcedo's group of works *Untitled* (1989–2014, ROOM 1) refers to the 1988 Urabá Massacre, in which paramilitary forces murdered workers on a banana plantation in northern Colombia.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### **Disappeared persons (“los desaparecidos”)**

The practice of so-called enforced disappearance (“desaparición forzada”) is a widespread means of intimidation used against civilians in civil wars.

According to the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory), since 1964 a total of 80,742 persons have disappeared in Colombia.

The Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas (Search Unit for Missing Persons), established in 2016, speaks of 104,537 missing persons.

This includes persons who have been abducted, killed in action or forcibly recruited with whereabouts unknown.

Enforced disappearances have lasting psychological repercussions for those left behind and destroy the social fabric as the uncertainty they bring leads to feelings of insecurity and distrust. According to the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, enforced disappearances can be traced first and foremost to paramilitary units, but also to guerrilla groups and state security forces.

## INFORMATION

The exhibition is generously supported by:

Beyeler-Stiftung

Hansjörg Wyss, Wyss Foundation

Thomas und Doris Ammann Stiftung

Cristina and Dr Thomas W. Bechtler

Renato Bromfman & Vania Rolemberg

Erica Stiftung

Familie Jeans Schweiz

Patronesses of the Fondation Beyeler

Ellen and Michael Ringier

White Cube

as well as further private patrons who wish to remain unnamed.

The exhibition guide has been produced with the friendly support of



Texts: Julia Beyer, Stefanie Bringezu, Victoria Gellner,

Fiona Hesse, Janine Schmutz

Editing: Stefanie Bringezu

Translation: Maud Capelle

Graphic design: Heinz Hiltbrunner

We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition guide at: [kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch](mailto:kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch)

## CATALOGUE



### **Doris Salcedo**

Edited by Sam Keller and Fiona Hesse  
for the Fondation Beyeler, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2023  
260 pages, ca. 150 illustrations, CHF 62.50

Further publications on Doris Salcedo are available from  
our Art Shop: [shop.fondationbeyeler.ch](http://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch)

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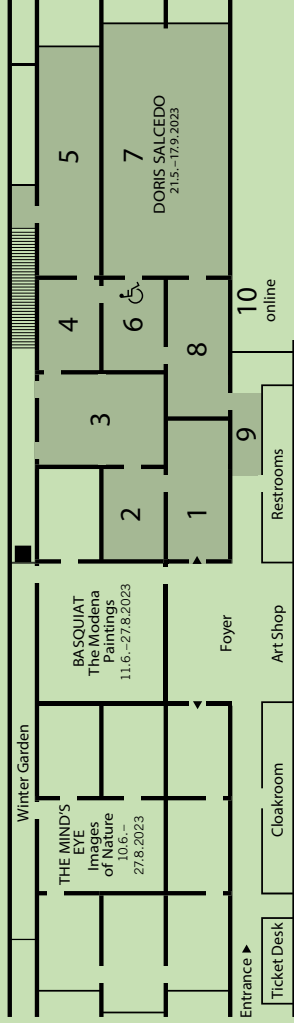
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**#BeyelerSalcedo**



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21 May – 17 September 2023



The artworks are very fragile, please do not touch!