

Notes on Looking

Contemporary Art in Los Angeles

Mexico City Part II: Antonio Vega Macotela

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Back in Los Angeles and full of nostalgia for DF, I went to the opening for Antonio Vega Macotela at Steve Turner Contemporary and discovered yet another Mexico City artist that is doing some very interesting and meaningful work. Whispering, his first solo show in the US, features three works that explore notions of exchange and almost seem as a form of activism. The more you learn about each piece, the more you realize the impact they create.



From Antonio Vega Macotela's solo-show "Whispering"; Photo courtesy of Steve Turner Contemporary

To better understand Macotela's current show, it's important to know about his previous work, which all started at one of Mexico City's largest prisons. Macotela explained that he started visiting Santa Martha Acatitla jail to better understand the concept of what time meant for prisoners. He realized that he could create an exchange with them by using this notion of "time". He would use a certain amount of his time to do things in their representation at a specific day and hour. In return the prisoners would have to do whatever he'd ask them to do as an artist. Therefore, all time was exchanged equally and never wasted. By taking their place in the world, he'd spend his day completing each request, such as visiting a tomb of a relative, dancing with a prisoner's mother, visiting a dying friend, cooking for a family, teaching an inmate's daughter to read, etc.



In one of those exchanges, Macotela learned a communication code from an imprisoned Mexican drug trafficker. This anamorphic writing system can only be read from specific vantage points. This new skill inspired Macotela to insert phrases in advertising spots of El Sol de México, a national Mexican newspaper. In order to discern the phrases, the viewer needs to kneel and look up at the newspaper, as if saying a prayer or getting ready to be executed. And then this is when the murmullo (whisper) begins, from the paper itself, from the viewer trying to read the message to himself, from those forgotten and unknown souls executed in the drug war, from those remaining families praying silently...



From Antonio Vega Macotela's solo-show "Whispering"; Photo courtesy of Steve Turner Contemporary

A Platoon, a video of seven Mexican soldiers telling their dreams, plays quietly in the next room. According to Macotela, these soldiers explained how when they had joined the army they began to have reoccurring dreams, but because these dreams were so intimate and personal (as well as dangerous for the soldiers to relay in public), they agreed to only tell the dream without sound. The video is of their lips, silently mouthing their reoccurring dreams. You can hear some background noises, some smacking of the lips and some whispers, but unless you know how to read lips it's almost impossible to know the descriptions being told.

Macotela explained how Juan Rulfo's story Pedro Páramo really inspired and influenced this body of work. In this story, the dead are forever walking around the town of Comala, and Juan, the protagonist in search of his father, tries to understand what is going on. The story is filled with whispers, echos and ghostly sounds, "Ruidos. Voces. Rumores. Canciones lejanas." Messages and metaphors slip through cracks, only to be heard if one is really paying attention, just like in Macotela's work.

"Sentirás que allí uno quisiera vivir para la eternidad. El amanecer; la mañana; el mediodía y la noche siempre los mismos; pero con la diferencia del aire. Allí, donde el aire cambia el color de las cosas; donde se ventila la vida como si fuera un murmullo; como si fuera un puro murmullo de la vida..." (from Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo)