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## Colombian art: back from the brink

As a festival of Colombian contemporary arts comes to Britain, Maya Jaggi travels to Bogotá and Medellín to discover how artists have responded to South America's longest-running war

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'Violence permeates and transforms everything' ... Colombian artist María José Arjona with her artwork Return 2008. Courtesy Galería Alcuadrado

A reputedly priceless Goya etching from the Disasters of War series was stolen last month from a gallery in the Colombian capital Bogotá. Visiting the exhibition in the Andean city days after the theft, I found a photocopy in place of Goya's Sad Premonitions, with an optimistic caption: "Space reserved for the return of the work."

The Goya exhibition, on loan from Zaragosa in Spain, was at the Gilberto Alzate Avendaño Foundation, in a colonial house in Bogotá's old quarter, whose narrow streets with brightly painted houses rise steeply into the Andean mist. The theft sparked debates about access to art, even a hoax claim by a terrorist group that turned out to be from a professor incensed by the high cost of ticket prices.

Yet no one argued that the masterpieces were out of place. Goya's scenes of torture and massacre, with blindfold captives and smirking bystanders, could have been drawn from news reports of recent years in a country that has suffered South America's longest-running war. Almost two centuries after this graphic testimony of Napoleonic atrocities in Spain, viewers seemed mesmerised. Schoolchildren and art students clustered open-mouthed around the small works, or sketched furiously on their pads.

The Goya exhibition coincided with two group shows of Colombian contemporary art that reflect sometimes disturbing aspects of the country's reality. On my third visit to the country in two years, I met writers, artists, film-makers and musicians who have formed part of a resurgence of contemporary arts in the country, which is to be celebrated this weekend in a cross-arts festival, Colombiage, at the Riverside Studios in London. Many are finding their own responses to a war that has involved guerrillas, paramilitaries and the army, and been funded in part by kidnapping and narco-trafficking.

The Alcuadrado gallery was founded in 2003 to put on site-specific shows in

abandoned or forgotten corners of Colombia's cities, from disused factories and parking lots to colonial churches. Without Remedy, a group show in a derelict hospital in Bogotá's barrio La Esmeralda, extends eerily through the dank concrete corridors and vacant wards of the Santa Rosa clinic. The show takes up five storeys.

One mischievously allegorical piece specially commissioned for the space, Jaime Ávila's *Silk Hands* (2008), consists of velvet mice with red-bulb eyes. It was inspired by the artful dodgers downtown on the Carrera Séptima, Bogotá's main artery, who lifted the artist's wallet. The dimly lit installation began with 200 mice; some, no doubt in a spirit of interactivity, were nicked.

In one of the most disquieting yet powerful works, *Return* (2008), by Miami-based performance artist María José Arjona, the spectator steps through bloody puddles made by red ink, splattered at eye level around the walls of a ward, without knowing how the blood-like stains were formed. In the next ward, the performance artist repeats the child-like blowing of bubbles at the wall that created the effect, but this time with pure soap to expunge the horror. Later, in the gallery's sleek offices in a high-rise building in downtown Bogotá, the artist tells me, "violence permeates and transforms everything."

"We think we can apply justice to it," José Arjona says, "but institutions are the dirtiest places. I try to create resistance, to come back to innocence and transparency."

Some 2,000 people saw this exhibition in three weeks. Alcuadrado's shows are free, and its co-founder Juan Gallo Restrepo, who has lived in London and is an admirer of Charles Saatchi and the YBAs, says the gallery is breaking even owing to sales of artworks – more than half of which are to institutions including Tate Modern. There have been 15 exhibitions in five years. "We're committed to showing work that shows the reality of this country," he says.

Ironically enough, it may be the respite from urban terror of the past few years that has increased the audience for such art. Many of these artists grew up during a period of terrorist bombings in the cities, when drug cartels vied for control with the state and each other. The strong-arm "democratic security" policy of president Álvaro Uribe, in power since 2002, has made cities and main corridors safer. Yet in rural no-go areas, war continues. While the conservative government (accused of being involved in "parapolitics") claims that inroads against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) and demobilisation of paramilitaries following a controversial amnesty, the US-backed crackdown on narco-traffic is a war few here believe can be won. Despite the high-profile rescue of the French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt and three kidnapped Americans (known here as the "jewels in the crown"), some 2,500 hostages are still held by the Farc and other groups. There is deep concern, and some resentment, that they may be forgotten.

Such concerns are reflected in the art I saw. In the videos of *Project for a Memorial* (2005), the Cali artist Oscar Muñoz copies faces of the disappeared from news photographs, painting images with water on paving stones which vanish as the slabs dry. His frantic repetition evokes death, disappearance and the duty of memory in a losing battle with oblivion. In Miguel Ángel Rojas's 59-minute video *Outline of Panic* (2003), also in the show, the artist's latex-gloved hand forensically traces blood stains he found on a city pavement. Rojas earlier caused controversy with *David* (2005), a photographic installation of 12 images of a nude soldier with an amputated leg in the pose of Michelangelo's sculpture, first shown in a disused Hilton hotel in Bogotá.

**As Juanes**, Colombia's global rock star and anti-landmine campaigner, told me last year, three Colombians fall victim to landmines every day – the worst toll in the world. Juanes, a former heavy metal singer turned soulful rocker, lives in both Miami and Medellín, a town located north-west of Bogotá in a temperate Andean valley.

Medellín is also the hometown of South America's most famous artist, Fernando

Botero, whose rotund sculptures dominate the square outside the Antioquía museum, in a former town hall. But inside I find a startling exhibition on Displacement and Reparation, with almost 50 works, mainly by Colombian artists. An estimated 3.8 million Colombians are internally displaced – the largest such population outside Sudan – and their plight has a huge impact on big cities. Some sense a social timebomb. A group of *desplazados* recently occupied a park in affluent northern Bogotá, demanding money promised by the mayor. According to the museum's director of projects, Carolina Jaramillo Ferrer, "people are blind to displacement - it's just a number. This is a way to open their eyes."

One work, Libia Posada's Cardinal Signs: Units of Measure (2008) consists of photographs of journeys mapped in ink on the legs of the *desplazados* who undertook them, many of whom are indigenous people. Other works question the official line that US-sponsored coca-eradication programmes cause no lasting damage to the land, saying that they are themselves a cause of displacement. Carlos Uribe's painting Horizons (1999) reproduces the heroic peasant couple of Francisco Antonio Cano's classic 1913 Colombian painting of the same title, but inserts a plane spraying defoliants into the pastoral idyll.

Yet Jaramillo Ferrer also believes artists are taking stock of "what we're losing on a cultural level – the richness of the heritage related to the land, which is sacred and irreplaceable." That sense of both loss and recovery echoes through the art.

- Colombiage, a weekend festival of films, music and talks, is at Riverside Studios, London W6, on October 18-19 2008.

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