

Raven



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Gender is a Race: An Interview with artist Tatiana Garmendia

by Susan Noyes Platt



Lamentation 10 (The Burning Times), drawing/multi-media by **Tatiana Garmendia**

A tall shape suggesting a woman covered with a veil of burnt paper looms over us in one gallery of the stunning art exhibition, "Under My Skin: Artists Explore Race in the 21st Century." The artist Tatiana Garmendia painstakingly burned through the silk paper with the words of domestic violence victims, words that we also hear on a soundtrack. As the artist explains, "[These are] bits of poetry, prayers, and terrifying personal accounts found on random blogs and support sites interspersed with the cold data, forming a kind of testament of suffering."

The statistics are appalling. Earlier this year Garmendia filled a gallery with a roomful of these twelve foot tall paper figures for her "Veils of Ignorance" project. The impact was overwhelming and profoundly moving.

Nearby this paper sculpture at the Wing Luke Exhibition are three large drawings by Garmendia — two from "The Lamentation Series," *Lamentation 4 (Lift Me Up Let Me Go)* and *Lamentation 10 (The Burning Times)* — and one from "The Last Judgment" series, Prophet 9. Veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq who were enrolled in Garmendia's painting classes at Seattle Central Community College, where she is a full professor, posed for the drawings. The emotional connection of the models to the subject gives them a poignant intensity. At the same time, the artist allows us distance by using distractingly beautiful textured paper, a classical drawing technique, and compositions based on specific Renaissance paintings. She seduces us with aesthetics, then confronts us with contradictions that defy our clichés and expectations. She is opening up our minds as we gaze at a woman covered in black holding a soldier in the dress of the U.S. Army. Why not, says the artist, there are many possibilities — the soldier's mother is Muslim, the soldier is an Afghan, but above all it refers to the fact that the pain of a son killed in war is universal (for more examples see the artist's website (www.tatianagarmendia.com)).

I spoke with the artist on August 21, 2013.

Susan Noyes Platt: How did you feel about being part of the exhibition, "Under My Skin: Artists Explore Race in the 21st Century?"

Tatiana Garmendia: I was honored to be with such a great group of artists who rattle my thinking and expectations and bring hidden information to light. These works reach out and grab me. There were hundreds of artists who submitted to the show, which makes me think about how much work is locked out of public discussion in museums and galleries. Why does such an important conversation only happen in the ethnic part of town?

SNP: As I discuss in my book, *Art and Politics Now*, the Seattle Art Museum did hold an exhibition in 2004 that triggered discussions of race. "Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self," curated by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. It was intended to heighten our understanding of photography's complicity in the construction of race. The exhibition was supported by a grant from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund for "connecting to new audiences." "New audiences" is clearly code for audiences of color. One of the most powerful events was the repeated presentation of Tawnya Pettiford-Wates's "Conciliation Project," featuring performances on slavery, sexism, and land grabs that deeply engaged audiences.

At the same time the Wing Luke Museum held the predecessor of the "Under My Skin" exhibit, "Beyond Talk, Redrawing Race." It was catalyzed by the racism, particularly against Arabs, that burst into the open following the World Trade Center attacks. It included twelve artists showing twenty artworks, with educational and interactive components for every work in the exhibition. It was also an early example of an art exhibition with an internet component that teachers and the general public could access. It encouraged book clubs, discussion groups, and library gatherings on race and other specific actions. The Southern Poverty Law Center was a partner and the website included their program "teaching tolerance."

The big difference from the Seattle Art Museum, was, of course, that Wing Luke had diverse contemporary artists and reached out to everyone including "white" people, while at the Seattle Art Museum, their programs intentionally reached out to communities of color.

TG: Well, those are big distinctions, Susan. They underline very different paradigms and power structures that define each museum's concept of community. I think we can infer that SAM recognized that communities of color were feeling excluded from their programming. You're absolute right, Tawnya's "Conciliation Project" was amazing, and she continued that project at Seattle Central Community College until she left the faculty to move to the East Coast. But I am nagged by this: Why is a racism-themed show presented at a museum only once in a generation and dependent on a grant? Is there an assumption that white people are not interested?

SNP: Not necessarily. The Seattle Art Museum now has a brilliant African American curator, Sandra Jackson-Dumont, who, as the only African American on the curatorial staff, is articulate and diplomatic as well as confrontational, if the situation calls for it. She has also created provocative exhibitions for individual artists of color in the Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Gallery (endowed for this specific purpose). The theme of "racism" is inherent in the work of the artists that she chooses to exhibit.

TG: I've met Sandra, and she is exceptional, as is the programming in the Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Gallery. Every quarter I take my students to SAM and we start our tour there. The bigger question is why do we still need a separate gallery to showcase African American artists? The answer is simple. Because we are still not fully integrated in the art world. It's truly a case of separate but equal, right? Take Marita Dingus, whose work you explore beautifully in chapter five of *Art and Politics Now*. Her 400 Men of African Descent, and its partner installation 200 Women, are always displayed in the African Art wing. Why? She's not an African artist. She's from right here. The work directly refers to the slave trade and resonates deeply with African Art, but it's not the only conversation it can have with the museum collection. I'd love to see them displayed next to Do Ho Suh's *Some/One* and Leon Golub's *White Squad #2* at some point. I want to see what kind of dialogue that opens up and how that might make the museum viewer connect their art experience to current events.

SNP: I love that idea — Golub and Dingus! That would be a great conversation. But, let us turn now to your own experience of racism and how you have come to take on that difficult theme in your work.

TG: I came to Florida in 1969, from Cuba, and left Florida in 1990 to go to the Pratt Institute in New York City. From there I moved to Seattle, and I have been the only full-time artist on the faculty of Seattle Central Community College since then. As I grew up in Miami, I saw two worlds. Segregation, with signs like "no dogs," "no Cubans," "no Niggers." was one reality. At the same time, I lived in a world of wealthy Cubans: they

were privileged and politically powerful. In Seattle, wealthy and middle class Latinos have little cultural agency. The mainstream is mainly aware of day laborers, who are actually a small percentage of Latinos here.

SNP: Let's talk about the exhibition. I found it significant that, unlike in the previous exhibition, there are references to mixing races, cross cultural adoption, mixed marriages, as well as two works that speak of the loss of ethnic identity over time as skin color becomes paler.

TG: The exhibition is very important, all of the artists have content, they are engaging the world. It is a myth that people of color are only interested in their own race.

SNP: How does your installation, "Veils of Ignorance," addressing violence against women, intersect with the topic of racism?

TG: It intersects on multiple levels. First of all there are the burqas. They address assumptions about what it is to be Muslim. I am using the burqa as a symbol of justice. The term "veil of ignorance" is based on a thought experiment described in the book *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls. The idea of the veil overcoming its stigma to become a requisite for true justice resonated deeply and inspired me to look deeper.

SNP: Isn't there a risk of misinterpretation with the burqa? Westerners tend to read it as a means of oppression.

TG: There is always misinterpretation. That is part of the point. We are ignorant of who is underneath. We only see a strong image of the Muslim other, we don't see behind that cliché. I came across a statement by an Islamic feminist, "All women everywhere wear the burqa." I understood this to mean that the veil is but an outward symbol of a much more pervasive reality of oppression, one that is global and not just regional.

As far as the connection of racism and domestic violence, abuses are racial. Native American women have the highest rate of rape. Southeast Asian women are sold to brothels for \$15,000 apiece. Sexual violence affects all classes, one race preying on another.

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We are not supported, period. It doesn't matter what culture, what color — women are third-class citizens period. Also, I want to add, that this piece is not an intellectual statement, it is a personal response to my own experiences; I have also been sexually assaulted. I was not collecting this information as a "comforting" outsider, but as a person that knows how that trauma can permanently affect your life.

People who are assaulted are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, to become homeless, to be assaulted again. Here are some statistics:
Out of one hundred rapes, only forty-six get reported. Of these, only twelve lead to an arrest, only nine of these get prosecuted. Of these only five lead to a felony conviction. But only three will spend a single day in prison. The other ninety-seven walk away free.

The other fifty-four women who got raped know nothing is going to happen. They hear, "If you get raped, it is your fault." They know it is not their planet — why bother to report it. People are more likely to intervene if a door is locked on a car than if a woman next to you or your girlfriend or sister is raped.

SNP: Let's talk about the drawings from the "Lamentation Series" — the burqa-covered woman holding a dead American soldier.

TG: I am intentionally mixing it up. I have worked with veterans and the families of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. My own assumptions about war have been called into question. I ask them, "Why did you go? It's a volunteer position. What motivates you?" The answers were altruistic, after 9/11 — a love of country, a belief that the U.S. can bring "freedom" and "democracy." Then they arrive in the country and they experience severe culture shock and confusion. "This is my enemy, this is my friend." It was totally ambiguous. The uniforms were alike, so we see what we want to see. There was no line in the sand. Sorrow was shared by both sides. In *Lamentation 10*, the "madonna" is offering support to the wounded, just as in a traditional biblical

lamentation of Mary and Christ.

I feel a burden, a sense of tension. This is my country. It gave me asylum. I was living in a camp from ages four to eight; I was not a political entity. My father was tortured and died at the age of thirty-six. I have freedoms here. What happens when you feel that the inviolability is broken? The U.S. government is now doing the same thing that was done to my father. Terror and abuse of power is associated with illegitimate governments. What happens to my sense of indebtedness and loyalty to find out we are also using the same tactics that destroyed my family.

My work doesn't have answers. I only have questions. But I was so amazed by the power of the work in the exhibition. There was not a single piece of work that did not deeply affect me emotionally. Community is important to me. My art is not just about me.

SNP: The exhibition (May 10-November 17, 2013), at the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, included the work of twenty-six artists chosen by a community panel. As Gail Tremblay, one of the jurors, stated at the opening, "This exhibition is about the importance of not dehumanizing. We are all alike. Race is a social construction that affects people's lives in terrifying ways."

For a review of the entire exhibition, see Platt's blog posting under Wing Luke at www.artandpoliticsnow.com, and for more discussion by the artists see <http://beyondtalk2.wordpress.com/>.

Susan Noyes Platt is the author of *Art and Politics Now: Cultural Activism in a Time of Crisis*, Midmarch Arts Press, 2011, and *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism*, Midmarch Arts Press, 1999. Visit <http://www.artandpoliticsnow.com/>.