

# Juan Manuel Echavarría: I'm interested in the traces left by the war

BY MARIZA BAFILE | Posted on April 17, 2018

Profound, sometimes impossible to heal, are the wounds left by a war on the body and souls of people. There are no winners in the armed confrontations, only victims. Mutilated bodies, broken souls, abandoned houses, shattered fields, dead without a name. This is what has left a civil war in Colombia that has not yet ended. Distressing panorama in which he has gone for years and years the artist Juan Manuel Echavarría. With discretion, respect, humility and humanity, he has portrayed the pain that remains scattered in small details that testify to the passage of fractured lives. With his lens he has captured echoes of terror that are trapped in the voids of houses, in the loneliness of an animal, in chalkboards with faded letters, on sheets of notebooks with half-finished children's drawings and dirt books.

Echavarría for almost fifty years lived in the world of dreams of literature, writing oneiric, fantastic novels, submerged in the other Colombia, that which sought, in a refined and learned creativity, the antidote to horror and fear. Until, as he confesses himself:

– In the threshold of the fifty the word told me “go away from me”. At that moment I entered into an existential crisis. I felt on the edge of a cliff and I traveled to New York to talk to two dear friends and great artists: Ana Tiscornia and Liliana Porter. They gave me a camera and threw me to the precipice. That camera was transformed into a parachute that dropped me in Colombia. I began to see what I had not seen until that moment, to know a country to which I belonged despite my escapes. I grew in my desire to investigate, to witness the violence of war through the image and art. In literature I was always attracted to the metaphor, the symbol. With the camera I chose that same path. I was not interested in reporting documents but in showing violence through art.



*Photo Credits: Juan Manuel Echavarría, Witness Miraflores 2016. Chromogenic printing, 100cm x 150cm*

## **Before dedicating yourself so passionately to photography was there a moment in which you felt the desire to express yourself with that medium?**

Before the age of fifty he considered photography the least of the arts. I traveled a lot and never felt the need to portray human and natural landscapes through the image, instead I was interested in the written word and always carried travel journals. Today I use the word as a complement to photography. I left my studio in Bogota. Now I visit war zones, I spend days listening to the stories of the people who lived that conflict in their own flesh. Nor can I understand the process that led me to such a radical change.

## **It seems that the lens of the camera has acted as a protective filter, which has facilitated the approach to pain. Something impossible to achieve with the word.**

I think that I wanted to turn my back on reality in Colombia and build another one through the word: a fantastic, dreamlike reality. Today I can say that for me literature was a shipwreck but also that, when you come out alive from a shipwreck, you appreciate what you learned. I learned from literature the value of metaphor and that is what is reflected in my images. I am interested in the traces left by the war, build a memory through them, decipher the labyrinth of conflict. Any war is much more complex than you can imagine, there are no whites and blacks, good and bad. The stories I hear and I am collecting have allowed me to glimpse very deep gray areas.



Photo Credits: Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Silencio Político* 2010. Chromogenic printing, 100cm x 150cm

**What triggered in you the desire to follow the trail of war through the photos?**

It arose from the moment my friends threw me to the precipice with a camera. My first series was released in 1996. I remember that I was walking the streets of a slightly marginal area of Bogotá. There were several fabric stores, one behind the other, with their merchandise displayed on the sidewalks. The fabrics were resting on broken, battered, mutilated mannequins. They were very impressive faces, I thought I saw an image of civilians arriving from a war and I began to photograph them. However, what struck me most was the indifference of the people who stopped, touched the fabrics, asked for the prices and never stopped to see the mutilated face of the mannequins. At that moment I thought: I did not want to acknowledge the violence that my country has experienced. That was my first series of photographs and since then I have not stopped investigating.

**For many years the word disappeared from your creative universe to give space to the image. Have you ever thought about putting together these two means of expression?**

The written word and the images are very different artistic tools, however I hope that at some point the photographs will be conjugated with the written journals. There are many stories behind my images. To discover them we had to move into very remote areas of the country. They were long tours during which the guides told us the story of the people who lived there. We were able to enter the house of the peasants, to talk with them who were the true protagonists of those terrible experiences. They told us about the massacres, the perpetrators, the displacements. Before photographing, there are other verbs: walking, listening, sharing.

**In those tours you have entered more than a hundred abandoned schools. The Serie The silences that arose from the photos taken to the boards in the middle of writing , solitary testimonies of truncated childhoods, precipitous escapes, show how education was one of the great victims of the conflict. They also speak of the fear that inevitably accompanied the children's lives.**

In the silence of the boards of the abandoned schools many stories were trapped. Behind them there are executions, massacres, massive displacements of peasant families and, of course, the fracture of the education of girls and boys. While I was taking those photos I thought about the myth of Perseus who, to look at the Medusa, an icon of terror, without being transformed into a statue, had to use his shield as a mirror. It is the indirect look. I think that to talk about violence, horror through art you have to use the indirect look and those boards for me are like the shield of Perseus.

**They also hide the story of women who suffered perhaps more than men. They had to deal with the mourning, the loss of houses, and a lot of physical violence.**

In Colombia there are many widows and in the painting workshops that I organized with former combatants, several women who entered very young, almost girls, into the guerrilla. They enrolled arriving from different stories: some had escaped family violence, others had fallen in love with a guerrilla fighter and had decided to follow him. Their homes were in very remote areas of the country where there was no state presence. The authorities were the army, the guerrilla and the paramilitaries that many today seem to have forgotten. They suffered more because war is also love and women were sometimes victims of violence and sometimes they were forced to abort.



Photo Credits: Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Lemon Test* 2010. Chromogenic print, 100cm x 150 cm

**Laura Reuter, director of the North Dakota Museum, when writing about the exhibition Mouth of ashes, says: Echavarría uses beauty to seduce the viewer and introduce him to his world. However, her definition of beauty includes knowing that at the center of everything beautiful is the uncomfortable and even the ugly. Is it really like that?**

All my work has an aesthetic on the surface that interests me. The beauty of the image allows me to catch the viewer, it is not an end but a means. What interests me is to communicate what it hides.

**In one of your visual compositions titled The tray of Bolívar , you make a reference to drug trafficking. To what extent has drug trafficking influenced and strengthened the conflict in Colombia?**

I think that the drug trade, starting in the 1980s, acted like gasoline in a bonfire. He enriched guerrillas and paramilitaries by allowing them to buy better weapons and raise more fighters. Nevertheless The worst thing about drug trafficking is that it has invaded all the institutions, it has corrupted the entire country and the international policies once again limited to those damages have turned out to be disasters. We can not forget that we even had a President, Ernesto Samper, who came to power thanks to the money from the Cali cartel. It is very difficult to get out of a situation like that.

**Discovering, entering into such a painful reality, from which you had been escaping for so long, to what extent has it changed you within?**

I think that I became a more tolerant human being, a person who listens with greater attention to the other and does not want to judge. I am convinced that he opened my heart, showed me horizons I did not know, realities I did not see. This work filled me with humanity. I believe that today I am a better human being.

**Approaching the horrors of war in an honest way, without preconceptions has allowed you to see how deep the damage it has left in people. Do you think that your work can help create bridges that allow a national reconciliation?**

With my artistic projects , for whose realization I have counted in the last ten years with the collaboration of Fernando Grisales, impeccable companion who has traveled the country with me, I wanted to make visible the invisible. In Colombia there is a terrible division between the urban and the rural. Sometimes in the cities we do not know what happened in the countryside and that's where the FARC, the paramilitaries and the army fought. In urban areas we had violence but where they suffered most was in the most rural and isolated areas of the country. In the bubble that for many was Bogotá we have not seen the horrors that the Colombian countryside lived. My wish is to do my bit to let everyone know what happened. Talk in Universities or other spaces of the experiences accumulated in these tours, of peasant families, how they live, what their relationship with animals is, narrate what displacements, massacres meant for them, share with others what we discovered in abandoned schools. They are very emotional visual investigations that I am interested in bringing to the city to see if, through the works, we can open spaces for reflection and emotion.

**It is a very important effort at a time when we are trying to achieve a peace deeply desired but very difficult to achieve. After so many hatreds, mourning, pain, do you believe that peace is a possible hope?**

Definitely the wound is very deep and it will not be easy to heal it. I think what can help is the search for the truth, to rescue the memory for show the new generations the horrors that we humans do. Avoid the normalization of war. I see hope in the Universities, where there are many people who study and try to understand what happened to us. I get frustrated when I listen to politicians who, after fifty years, continue with a speech full of hatred. They repeat the word "war" as one of the parrots in my video "Guerra y Pa" does. In Colombia we have not been able to complete the word Peace collectively. We keep saying Pa . *War and Pa* .



Photo Credits: Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Requiem NN* (2006-2013). Lenticular print, 50cm x 50cm

Juan Manuel Echavarría with his work has managed to give a deep meaning to the words home, homeland, common territory. His camera speaks on behalf of a population that had no alternatives to war. Echevarría can not give them back the life they lost, but it rips them to oblivion. His voice is calm, unstoppable as the water of the Magdalena River, a pious coffin where dead, mutilated bodies rest, with no name or beings to mourn. They are the protagonists of his documentary *Requiem NN* that in New York he presented the MoMA.

It is a meticulous work, that of Juan Manuel Echavarría, a patient, loving, respectful search for pain. With his art he is trying to recompose the dismembered body of a country.