



February 21, 2021

“RÉQUIEM NN” BY JUAN MANUEL ECHAVARRÍA:
ADDRESSING THE ENDLESS DRUG WAR IN COLOMBIA

PUBLISHED BY TULIKA BAHADUR

ON ART AND AESTHETICS

“I was born in Medellín in 1947. Coincidence or not, my personal history runs parallel to the violence in Colombia. Since the year of my birth, the country has never known long-lasting peace,” says Juan Manuel Echavarría, who, for the past two decades has addressed the dread and human tragedy of the endless drug war in Colombia through photography and video.

In 2006, after his first visit to [Puerto Berrío](#), a town on the banks of the Magdalena River, Echavarría set up the foundation Puntos de Encuentro to give scholarships to students from rural areas, invisible victims of the drug war. Through 2013, he has taken multiple journeys to document a cemetery in the town. Within the cemetery, a particularly colourful mausoleum stands apart from the others. The tombs are marked with the letters NN: Ningún Nombre—No Name.

Echavarría brings the phenomenon to his current exhibition “Réquiem NN”, on view at [Josée Bienvenu Gallery](#) in New York City and also at [Tate Modern](#) in London.



Juan Manuel Echavarría. Courtesy of Josée Bienvenu Gallery.

The people of Puerto Berrío save the nameless bodies from the waters of the Magdalena and bury them in the cemetery. Then they perform a second ritual. A NN can be “escogido”—chosen—by someone who agrees to take care of their tomb, to pray for their soul, in exchange for favours from the dead. The blessed one adopts the NN, decorates the tomb with flowers and often a marble slate saying, “Thank you NN for the favour received.” Some caretakers even name their NN, often granting them their own family name, inscribing their new name on the marble.

Echavarría explains: “On one level, the living make a business-like transaction with the dead: In return for a favour, I will keep up your tomb, decorate it, paint it, bring a glass of water so your soul will not be thirsty, bring you flowers, humanise you by giving you a name. But collectively they are saying, we won’t let the violence erase you, we snatch you away from those who have made you disappear, we take care of you, we give you names. Their pact with the dead reconstructs the social fabric.”

Echavarría uses lenticular prints in order to capture two moments, months or years apart in each photograph. The sixty five photographs are installed in a grid arrangement, recreating the original structure of the NN mausoleum. Despite its somewhat superstitious and trade-like rationale, the practice ultimately moves its perceiver for its great humanity. And the artist documents it with great attention and heart. Quite dramatically is the viewer of the photographs reminded of the potential and sacred preciousness of every single life—belonging to any place or period.



“Réquiem NN” by Juan Manuel Echavarría. Courtesy of Josée Bienvenu Gallery.



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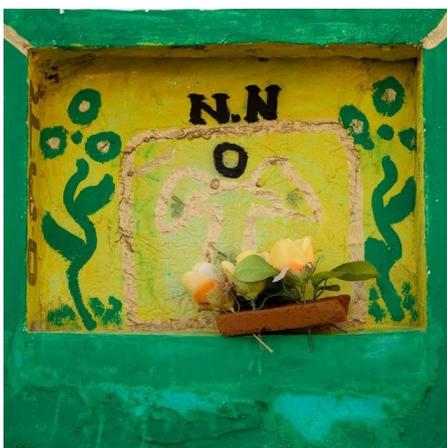


The artist continues on his beginnings and his journey: “Literature was my first step into the field of art. In 1981 I wrote *La Gran Catarata* [the great waterfall], an exploration into mythology and metaphor. In love with the oral traditions in the village of Barú, in the Colombian Caribbean, in 1986 I opened La Casa Amarilla, a cultural centre promoting art and music in the village. *La Gran Catarata* was followed by *Moros en la Costa* [Moors on the coast], the result of my research in the Archives of the Indies in Seville and of my readings of the great stories of the chroniclers of the New World.

“In 1995 my creativity with the written word entered a crisis. It was then that my friends Ana Tiscornia and Liliana Porter encouraged me to replace the pen with a camera. After my first series *Portraits*, I started using art to research violence in Colombia. Twenty years of research, a short time to explore such a deep-rooted tragedy, have pushed me to leave my studio in Bogotá and to wander into some of the remote areas devastated by war.

“These photographic journeys have allowed me to meet and listen to the stories of the campesinos [a peasant farmer] who have experienced the horrors of war firsthand. I have been able to see their homes, meet their families, feel their hospitality, see their animals and realize the state of abandonment in which they live. Through the foundation Puntos de Encuentro (2006), scholarships are granted to some survivors of the war who are determined to enter university and change their realities. Through art, the foundation also rescues memory from oblivion promoting painting workshops with exFrom “-combatants.”

Echavarría lives and works in New York and Bogotá. His work has been exhibited extensively throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States. In 2017-2018, an expansive 20-year career survey exhibition was on view at MAMBO Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, CO.



“Réquiem NN” by Juan Manuel Echavarría. Courtesy of José Bienvenu Gallery.