

Resonant Solitudes / Mónica Mayer

I didn't sleep well last night. At 4 a.m. I woke up sweating and could not get back to sleep. Instead of counting sheep, I started listing the possible causes of my anxiety.

Before I went to bed I had watched several news shows. The apocalyptic pictures of the tsunami in Asia are enough to give anyone nightmares for ten years. The same goes for reports about murders in maximum-security prisons and the lynching of policemen. But that wasn't what had caused my anxiety.

Then I thought that my insomnia was due to my shock at seeing a dear friend of mine, curator Judith Gómez del Campo, state on Channel 13 that the two men who had tried to abduct her in the parking lot of the Iberoamericana University a few years ago were about to get out of jail, long before they had finished serving their sentences. Before her, they had kidnapped another young woman. One of the criminals was a teacher at the same university! I also remembered I'd been shocked when I'd heard that artist Luis Miguel Suro had been mugged and murdered in Guadalajara last December 17. He was thirty-two years old! I was horror-stricken by the news.

When I had calmed down after drinking a glass of water, I remembered another reason why I hadn't been able to sleep: that morning I had gone to see *Soledades Sonoras* (Resonant Solitudes), an installation piece that Vida Yovanovich is showing at the Centro de la Imagen. It doesn't happen often, but some pieces reach right down and touch me on a subconscious level. This one had affected me very deeply.

Yovanovich's premise seems simple. One enters a dark, maze-like space until one reaches a room where two projectors display a series of images of women in prison. These are black-and-white photographs, projected against the room's facing corners. A small fragment of image is also projected into another dark room at the back. The gloom prevails, stifling any hope. Sound floods the installation: it is the inmates' own voices telling us about their lives, what brought them to prison and their experiences there. Sometimes all you hear is the prison's ambient noise. When there is a moment of silence it's hard to breathe.

But *Soledades Sonoras* is not a simple piece. The installation is effective because of its depth and precision. The photographer spent seven years visiting prisons and getting to know the inmates, and the outcome of this, are deeply personal images that involve a wide range of emotions. There is no prejudice or fear in them... or, for that matter, compassion: only the desire to understand life.

Yovanovich has years of experience photographing women caught in difficult situations. Her series *Cárcel de los sueños* (Prison of Dreams), for instance, which received the Casa de las Américas award in Cuba in 1990 (cf. www.zonezero.com, “Prison of Dreams”) dealt with the topic of old age with the same commitment with which she now approaches the inmates. She is not a photographer who takes her work lightly. Her projects go much above a simple product for exhibition or publication. They are vital commitments, experiences that change the life of the photographer and that of the one being photographed, thus their strength.

Once I had figured out why I was so anxious, I was able to go back to bed. I fell asleep thinking that Yovanovich’s work reveals the fact that many women end up in prison because they get caught up in vicious circles of violence: women with drug habits whose parents were also addicts, or wives who killed their husbands after enduring years of physical abuse. I also felt that work like Yovanovich’s might help us to better understand the problematic underlying criminal behavior. Though this serves as little consolation to the victims, it allows us to see that there are ways of breaking this cycle, so that, one day, there might be less violence. Is this only a dream?

MAYER, Mónica. “Soledades Sonoras,” *El Universal*, January 7, 2005.