

Soledad Salamé: Considering Boundaries
Transart
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In May of 2001 I wrote for Soledad Salamé's exhibition *En el Laberinto de la Soledad* a very large installation that was mounted at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago, Chile. The show opened on September 12, 2001. The world changed before the opening. Now I write again for *Forced by Nature*, which will open on September 9, 2021, once again in a world that has changed.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, this country has suffered a nearly catastrophic financial collapse, a presidential administration that evidently intended to mutate the fundamental DNA of democracy, and now a viral pandemic that has rebooted the globe. The relevance of Salamé's work has not only survived these calamities but transcended them and grown more pertinent.

Throughout her career, perhaps throughout her life, Soledad has viewed the world as being in a state of crisis both politically and environmentally. Her work has sought to pinpoint issues of extreme tension and illustrate them in a manner that emphasizes their vital nature and leads the viewer to a deeper understanding of causes and effects. At age eighteen the artist left Chile and immigrated to Venezuela and her global outlook expanded further, a process that has never stopped. In her installation entitled *The Labyrinth of Solitude* she laid bare both the fragility and extreme beauty of our global environment. Since 2001 she has witnessed the ravages of increasingly bellicose politics and progressively deteriorated environmental conditions that have forced the flight and migration of millions of people internationally. Then,

as 2020 dawned, the world rapidly slid into a pandemic that has left millions dead and yet remains of unknown proportions.

The objects presented in *Forced by Nature* represent some of Salamé's most refined work. This refinement is expressed not only in the artistic vocabulary that the artist has developed over the course of her career, but in the variety and use of media. Her extreme facility allows her to express herself in diverse techniques using skills that she has honed in her studio, focused through her travels, and cultured with extensive reading and research. She is able to understand relationships that exist among enormously complex subjects, climate change, immigration and racism, but conceive images that exemplify the more quotidian aspects of life such as agriculture, family stability, craft, social justice and the fragility of interpersonal networks. Some of the work was created before the COVID19 pandemic, other pieces while the virus tore through countries, cities, villages and homes. In any case, what Salamé demonstrates here is an astonishing aptitude of tools, skills and media.

The glass newspaper installations are neither print, nor sculpture but make a profound, eloquent point of the lack of transparency within our culture; embroidered frontpages draw a direct connection between the daily lives and pursuits of migrants and the ponderous weight of the prevailing body politic; sandblasted blown glass works elegantly imply both the depth of our humanity and its fragility. Two new fabric works, both made during the current pandemic, have emerged from that experience. *Air*, three large screen-printed and hand dyed panels of silk, invites viewers to examine it at close range, to appreciate the color and movement and realize that the menace of COVID is invisible, in the air, everywhere. *For Our Heroes* solidifies that

fear, picturing washed surgical masks drying in an open window. These can be seen as the culmination of Soledad's years of consideration, which have resulted in this exhibition: life is fragile, it flows and changes, and is often made manageable by simple, daily heroic acts—washing a mask for a nurse to wear the next day.

Postscript

A work that I believe eloquently captures the essence of Salamé's intellect is not in the exhibition. It was not made by the artist but collected by her on the Mexico/Texas border. It is an embroidered felt and fabric sleeve that slips over a bottle or glass to keep the drink cool. **NO WALL** is stitched in bright yellow felt. A border wall does so much more than slowing immigration, it destroys economies, families and lives. Soledad Salamé quickly grasped the fact that this simple handmade tool embodied the politics, lack of transparency, corruption and denial that shape our world and may determine its fate.

