

Bmore Art

MEDIA STUDIES: SOLEDAD SALAMÉ AT GOYA CONTEMPORARY

By Kerr Houston | October 3, 2019



Near the entrance into Soledad Salamé’s lyrical, affecting show at Goya Contemporary, *We the Migrants: Fleeing/Flooding*, on view through Oct. 26, stand three thick piers comprised of stacked, folded newspapers. In form and dimension, they recall Anne Truitt’s celebrated column sculptures. But where Truitt’s works were cerebral studies in color, scale, and abstraction, Salamé’s piers are emphatically worldly. Atop each, pressed under a pane of glass, rests a reproduction of a dramatic newspaper article (on the first election of Obama, a migrant caravan, and flooding in Bangladesh). Artistic abstraction and geopolitics, often assumed as distinct realms, are brought into a tight and irreducible combination.

That idea motivates much of this show, which is at once a rumination on the ways in which global change is publicized and an exploration of a range of artistic materials—an inquiry into the two different senses of the term media. In a 2019 piece entitled “Layered News,” for instance, we see a headline and accompanying image from a New York Times article about migrant workers. The form of the piece—a black-and-white pigment print of a screenshot of an online story—immediately calls attention to the complex and disembodied modes by which such stories circulate. (“I want the viewer to also consider the forms through which we encounter and digest information,” Salamé told Jennie Hirsh in an interview in the accompanying catalogue.)

But that’s not all, for Salamé has also embroidered certain local details of the print, so that a worker’s clothing and picked items of produce now resound brightly. The action feels at once tender and tragic: Rather like Zoe Leonard’s stitched fruits, these sewn interventions seem intended to make a shattered

world whole again, and to find meaning and even pleasure in a field of rhetoric that is often cast in reductive, two-dimensional and black-and-white terms. And, like Leonard's work, they do so by rooting meaning in the bodily and the physical. As an ethereal, digital article is made into a print, and then embellished with a series of stitches, the importance of the hand is implied—and the value of the personal, individual contribution confirmed.



Install view of *We the Migrants: Fleeing/Flooding*

A series of silkscreen works on silk organza echoes and extends this rehabilitative approach. In “Blue is Becoming Green,” also from 2019, the hand-dyed and overpainted ground evokes the icy blues and cool whites of a polar ocean. Added marks call to mind contour lines and land masses, suggesting the shifting, drifting motions of calved icebergs. But if the work's iconography feels geological, the actual artistic forms are tremulous and delicate. They seem contingent and precarious: a terrifying idea, when we think of it in relation to the warming, melting polar ice caps. On both a technical and conceptual level, this is strong work, a masterly exercise in controlling a challenging, diaphanous material and a plaintive meditation on the ungraspable fragility of our massive planet.

Also intriguing is a series of sandblasted folded glass works, each of which is engraved with a semblance of a newspaper front page and illuminated with a spotlight, projecting the text onto the nearby wall. Again, clever tensions are apparent here. The brittle glass retains, in its bend, a hint of its former viscousness. And the frank transparency of the panels—a metaphor for an honest, functioning press?—is undermined by the angled installation, which produces distorted projections of the text. As a result, the news accounts etched into the glass feel both memorialized and tenuous, elegant but insubstantial, and inevitably slanted.

For the most part, this is a ravishing show, composed in a tender and elegiac key and at once coherent and intelligent. Salamé is a subtle and meticulous artist, generally alert to the power of understatement, the potentialities of her materials, and the eloquence of a single mark. She excels on the level of detail, and her work often rewards close study. Given all of this, however, the large applied texts, affixed to the wall, that accompany some of the works in the show struck me as clumsily discordant. A part of the work, they reiterate, in all capital letters, the titles of certain works: “White is Becoming Blue,” we read, and we glean that the artist is trying to convey a sense of urgency, as ice caps inexorably become ocean. But it

feels like a cheap trick, akin to certain Twitter users capitalizing whole phrases to make them more convincing, and it's ultimately little more than distracting. In shouting the obvious, the texts nearly overwhelm the nuanced complexity of the adjacent forms.



Soledad Salamé, “Blue is Becoming Green” and part of “Stacks”

A few works, too, disappoint. The only video in the show (“Crossing the Borders,” 2018) offers a 4-minute account of the artist’s visit to Boquillas del Carmen, a Mexican village on the banks of the Rio Grande. Roughly edited, visually unremarkable, and uncertain about its point of view, it’s not a memorable piece. Neither is a nearby ovoid form, made of blown glass, that bears a number of sandblasted phrases on its surface. A few of these (“Protect what you love”) initially suggest the dark paranoia of Jenny Holzer’s truisms—until we realize that we’re simply reading a series of nominally inspirational environmentally themed quotes from celebrities including Jean-Michel Cousteau and Leonardo DiCaprio (“You are the last, best hope of earth”). The result feels sanctimonious and almost saccharine. No surprise, perhaps, that these works occupy the gallery’s back room.

So let’s make our way, instead, back to the front room, and have one more look at the three columns of newsprint. Still they stand there, as solemn as steles, their accounts of forces that shape the world pressed flat like botanical specimens. Still they testify to massive upheavals, suggesting an irreducible link between politics, carbon emissions, extreme weather, and the refugee crisis. But now we notice, as well, the thousands of partial phrases and verbal fragments visible on the folds of the papers below: “note problems at the Southern” and “videos and hard-to-debunk con,” a babbling turmoil of nearly nonsensical lines. But only nearly, because the more we read—“space in holding cells, part of a”—the more we sense that there is some sort of unifying logic at work here.

The world is changing. And the daily chatter of the news media, as it reports on the changes, can feel both unsettling, alarmist, and ephemeral. It can also distort and distract. But if we pay close heed, Salamé suggests, we can nevertheless discern the profound seismic shifts in the ground beneath our feet. The babble quiets and yields to order; the quotidian becomes monumental. A line evokes a shoreline; a river is an embattled border. A single stitch can be charitable. The world continues to change. And our gestures, this moving show insists, can matter.



Soledad Salamé, “Layered News” (photo by Kerr Houston)



Soledad Salamé, “Stacks”

We the Migrants: Fleeing/Flooding is on view at Goya Contemporary through Oct. 26, 2019. Photos by Michael Koryta, courtesy of Goya Contemporary except where otherwise noted.