

The Displaced Heirloom: a response to Rosa Tato's "Desplazada".

Brita Frost 2007

BIOGRAPHY

Rosa Tato completed a Bachelor of Fine Art Honours (Sculpture) in 2007 at the Royal Melbourne Institute (RMIT). Since 2003 she has exhibited in contemporary art spaces and university galleries in Australia and abroad. In 2007 she exhibited works that culminated from two separate funded experiences in China. Recent commissions also include collaborations with Mills & Gorman Architects and Australian Art Resources.

Tato lives and works in Melbourne.

Small black cups of ancient Spanish lace rest in a neat row on a light box, throwing shadows, ornate and delicate; cupping and casting the light, recreating what might be the last breathless moments of a Spanish afternoon. It is the light that I remember when I think of Rosa Tato's installation, "Desplazada" at RMIT's First Sight Gallery: the light and the shadows that linger on the cold cement floors and white walls of the gallery. A certain and deliberate incongruity that exists between the harsh light of the fluorescent light box and overhead projector, and the soft contours and shapes cast by the black lace cups.

Tato's family heirlooms take the cold and institutional light of the fluorescent and subvert it, soften it, but a tension remains, between the remembering and the present, the imagined memory of a warm Spanish evening and the stark present of the institutional gallery. It is Tato's use of light that first makes me think of binaries and double entendres, like a sinister parlour game.

Desplazada is a Spanish word meaning displaced or out of place, a word with strong links to the word Diaspora. A perhaps unintentional double entendre, Tato's play on displacement is at the core of "Desplazada", for while Tato has displaced the family heirloom by placing it in the gallery space she is also interrogating the multiple meanings of displacement and the Diaspora, the idea is a struggle between two ideas about place and history. While the similarities in intent and meaning between the terms displacement and Diaspora are undeniable they nevertheless have different social and cultural implications.

For while displacement describes the movement of people across the globe and often implies a profound sense of loss as people find themselves uprooted, uplifted and transplanted, the word Diaspora describes a kind of coming together. The term *Desplazada* or Diaspora reminds us of the collective nature of the displaced, the manner in which the displaced are drawn together across the globe, connected increasingly by technology but also by memory and history and the object: the object that connects the collective not just to their history but to their place as well.

Binaries are often overstated but in Tato's work they are insurmountable. This is apparent in Tato's use of the historical and cultural artefact, the heirloom to create or perhaps recreate the art object. The provenance of the two family heirlooms: a bolt of antique Spanish lace and a disintegrating Tortoiseshell comb is intrinsic to the meaning of the installation. Tato has meticulously recorded the preservation of the Tortoiseshell comb, photographing each stage of its immersion in latex. As the object is recreated as an art object it is also preserved shifting it from an artefact to something else entirely.

Art is so rarely associated with preservation. In this sense Tato's parlour game, her intervention in the historical and cultural process is far more intense and dramatic than the viewer might initially suspect. Tato has transformed the provenance of the cultural artefact, reconfiguring it as a transient installation within the cool and austere space of the institution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The artist gratefully acknowledges the following people for their assistance in realising this project. Peter Cripps, Aleks Danko, Greg Creek and a big thankyou to Jen Brooks for her continued support.

Located in the vaulted basement of Storey Hall at 344 Swanston Street, First Site RMIT Union Gallery is considered to be one of Melbourne's most innovative galleries for emerging artists and designers. www.rmit.edu.au