

DORIS SALCEDO'S SITES OF COLLECTIVE MOURNING:
THE EMBODIED SUBJECT AND RITUALIZED INTERACTIVITY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	VII
INTRODUCTION	1
Victims of Violence in <i>Plegaria Muda</i> and <i>A Flor de Piel</i>	4
A History of Turmoil: Violence in Colombia	6
A Shift in Salcedo’s Oeuvre	8
Overview of Scholarship on Doris Salcedo	9
CHAPTER ONE: ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND AN EMBODIED SUBJECT	12
Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s <i>Phenomenology of Perception</i>	13
Sculptures with Human Presences	14
Interacting with <i>Plegaria Muda</i> and <i>A Flor de Piel</i> : An Embodied Subject	16
Salcedo’s Process of Creation: Handmade Readymades	18
Juxtaposing the Present and Absent Body	19
CHAPTER TWO: INSTALLATION ART AND INTERACTIVITY.....	23
The Viewer’s Space: Increasingly Interactive Qualities	26
Installation Art as “Meeting Points”	29
A Continued Interest in Space: Extension of Salcedo’s Public Works.....	30
CHAPTER THREE: THE LANGUAGE OF RITUAL	33
Sacred Sites: Art Museum as Ritual	35
Ritual and Salcedo’s Process of Creation.....	36

A Transfer of Ritual from Artist to Viewer	42
Religious References	45
The Power of Ritual: Healing and Regeneration	47
CONCLUSION.....	51
ILLUSTRATIONS	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	70
VITA.....	73
ABSTRACT.....	74

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015.
- Figure 2. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (grass detail), 2008–10.
- Figure 3. Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel*, installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015
- Figure 4. Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel* (detail), 2012.
- Figure 5. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1990.
- Figure 6. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (detail), 1992/2004.
- Figure 7. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled* furniture works, 1989-1995.
- Figure 8. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1998.
- Figure 9. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, installation view, Museo nazionale delle arte delle XXI secolo (MAXXI), Rome, 2012.
- Figure 10. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, Installation view, CAM–Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 2011.
- Figure 11. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (table leg detail), 2008-10.
- Figure 12. Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel* (test fragment), 2011–12.
- Figure 13. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail of scale), 2008-10.
- Figure 14. Doris Salcedo, *Unland Series*, 1995–98.
- Figure 15. Video stills of process of sewing *A Flor de Piel*, White Cube Gallery.
- Figure 16. Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda III*, 1994.
- Figure 17. Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather*, 1993-1994.
- Figure 18. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, Nasher Sculpture Center, 2016.
- Figure 19. Ceiling of *Plegaria Muda* installation, Guggenheim, New York, 2015

- Figure 20. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1989-90.
- Figure 21. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail of viewer interaction), installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015.
- Figure 22. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail of repetition), 2008–10.
- Figure 23. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, August 27, 1999.
- Figure 24. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, August 13, 2000.
- Figure 25. Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth* (detail), 2007.
- Figure 26. Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsest*, 2013-Present.
- Figure 27. Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997.
- Figure 28. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1986.
- Figure 29. Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, 2002.
- Figure 30. Video stills of extensive research before creating *A Flor de Piel*, White Cube Gallery.
- Figure 31. Video stills of individual treatment of rose petals in *A Flor de Piel*, White Cube Gallery.
- Figure 32. Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (grass detail), 2008–10.
- Figure 33. Video stills of Salcedo's assistants working on *A Flor de Piel*, White Cube Gallery.
- Figure 34. Virgin of Guadalupe with Apparitions, 1656.
- Figure 35. Teresa Margolles, *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*, 2009.

INTRODUCTION

The arguments in this thesis stem from my experience with Doris Salcedo's retrospective exhibition entitled *Doris Salcedo* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, New York, from June through October of 2015. *Doris Salcedo* featured the artist's most significant works from the late 1980s to the present. They were displayed primarily in chronological order. The arrangement clarified a distinctive shift in her most recent works that reveals Salcedo's progressive emphasis on a meticulous process of creation, repetitive elements within her installations, engagement with the viewer, and the replacement of found objects in her early sculpture with organic materials in handmade configurations. *Plegaria Muda* (2008-10) and *A Flor de Piel* (2015), two of her most recent works featured in the retrospective, exemplify these characteristics.

Plegaria Muda (fig.1), or "Silent Prayer," has appeared in several iterations. It is typically composed of 122 pairs of handmade wooden tables that approximate the size and shape of a human coffin. Due to the constraints of the exhibition space, the Guggenheim retrospective featured thirty-three pairs. Within each pairing, one table is placed upside down on top of a second table, each separated by a thick layer of soil scattered with dangling roots. Blades of live grass pierce through hand-drilled holes that perforate the overturned table's surface. Salcedo weathers the wood by hand (fig. 2), so that each table is unique and appears worn down from years of use. In varying areas, the wood slats are muted in color, crookedly aligned, sanded down, or cracking. Similarly, the soil between the tables varies in structure so that it seems natural; Salcedo carved into

the layer by hand, forcing the crumbling of soil. The tables are tightly crammed into the gallery in a maze-like configuration, encouraging the viewer to wind throughout them.

The repetition of forms recalls a mass grave.

Described by the artist as a burial shroud or a funeral offering, *A Flor de Piel* (fig. 3) is composed of over 250,000 specially preserved rose petals that seem suspended between a state of life and decay. Due to the chemical treatment, the fragile roses appear to maintain their pliant texture. Descriptions of *A Flor de Piel* attribute the title to an idiomatic Spanish phrase used to describe an overt display of emotion, similar to the expression of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve.¹ However, the usage of the phrase *A Flor de Piel* is fluid, allowing various interpretations including "on the surface," "skin deep," or extreme sensitivity. *Flor* literally translates to flower and *piel* signifies skin. At the retrospective exhibition, the work was installed in the back corner of the gallery. Its massive size, approximately thirty-seven feet by twenty feet long, in an otherwise empty space was overwhelming. From a distance, *A Flor de Piel* mimics an undulating deep red fabric that crinkled and unfolded across the gallery. In some areas, the cloth appeared to seep from under the gallery wall, evoking a bloodstained floor. However, upon closer inspection, it is evident that the material in reality is composed of individual rose petals. Salcedo painstakingly stitched each petal together with thick thread, utilizing a surgical suture. Both the petals and stitches appear organically patched, rather than following a strict pattern, resulting in a personal, handmade fabric (fig. 4). The varied overlap of each thin petal allows the dark red tones of the shroud to fluctuate.

¹ Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, *Plegaria Muda* (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2015), http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/plegaria_muda/.

My response to *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* was significantly different than my encounter with Salcedo's earlier works included in the retrospective. I experienced a powerful emotional response, feeling a somberness after lingering in the galleries. The visceral installations pulled me into their intricacies and I felt compelled to interact corporeally. I wound throughout *Plegaria Muda*, investigating the handmade details of each pair of tables and stood in silence in front of *A Flor de Piel* in awe of the juxtaposition of beauty and tragedy. I noted that other visitors gathered in these galleries for prolonged periods of time as well.

Salcedo's retrospective exhibition illustrated an observable shift in her later works, emphasizing qualities merely suggested in her earlier sculptures. These include the meticulousness of Salcedo's process of creation, corporeal references, repetition, an awareness of space, and the introduction of living organic material. Due to this shift, Salcedo's later works significantly alter the viewer's experience. Namely, rather than enforcing a particular message regarding political violence, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* more generally incite a sense of empathy within the viewer towards the themes evoked by the displayed objects. I argue that the works achieve this due to the encouragement of an embodied, personal response, the emphasis on the viewer's presence through the use of scale and installation space, and the incorporation of ritual. By encouraging an engaged encounter with works that subtly indicate healing, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* simulate a process similar to mourning as a means of symbolically commemorating suffering.

Victims of Violence Commemorated in *Plegaria Muda* and *Flor de Piel*

For over twenty years, Salcedo has investigated her native Colombia's history of political violence, as well as issues stemming from racism, colonialism, and other forms of social injustice. The artist's personal experiences in Colombia often inform her work, particularly her investigative research on *los desaparecidos*. This term references the thousands of Colombians who have been abducted and murdered. Due to a repressive government, these individuals often disappear with no explanation or discovery of their whereabouts. Her understated sculptural works exude a poetic sensibility as they subtly address violence without literally representing it. As Salcedo discusses, they often refer to the lives of the marginalized and the voiceless, from murdered victims, those suffering from traumatic loss, or the disempowered of the Third World.

The creation of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* stemmed from specific violent events that deeply moved Salcedo. As she noted in an interview, "the first step I take in the making of a work of art is to orient myself toward the victim to whom I address the piece, and whose experience is a prerequisite for the very existence of the work."² The museum labels for each work in the retrospective outlined the details of such events, encouraging viewers to treat her works as objects memorializing actual victims.

Madeleine Grynsztejn, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, reiterates this notion stating, "Salcedo fashions works that recognize and legitimize the lives lived by these subjects . . . and by giving physical manifestation to individual experiences of human suffering, she bears testimony to those larger mechanisms of power that have

² Madeleine Grynsztejn and Julie Rodrigues Widholm, *Doris Salcedo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 215.

diminished peoples' sense of both self and the public realm.”³ For example, *Plegaria Muda* is a response to Salcedo's extensive research on gang violence during a trip to Los Angeles in 2004.⁴ After discovering that more than 10,000 young people had been killed on the streets of L. A. in the past two decades, she spent time in the city's neighborhoods witnessing the toll of such violence.⁵ The artist observed the lack of mourning for these victims due to their association with gangs. She connected the murders with the concept of “social death”—a condition in which certain groups are alienated by the wider society to the point of being forgotten, mistreated, or ignored.

While this trip was an impetus for *Plegaria Muda*, the artist states that the work additionally reflects her response to the murders of over 2,500 young people in Colombia between 2003 and 2009.⁶ The government had implemented a system of rewards for soldiers in the Colombian army if they could prove that a great number of guerillas had died in combat. Due to these incentives, the army lured young men from deprived areas with false job offers, murdering them and presenting them as unidentified guerillas.⁷ As she had done in Los Angeles, Salcedo accompanied a group of mothers searching for their “disappeared” sons who were eventually found in mass graves. The process of attempting to identify remains abandoned in unmarked locations heavily affected Salcedo. The somber repetitiveness of *Plegaria Muda* alludes to the senselessness of anonymous mass murders Salcedo witnessed both in Colombia and Los Angeles, yet the

³ Madeleine Grynsztejn and Julie Rodrigues Widholm, *Doris Salcedo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Doris Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda* (White Cube Gallery, 2011), http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_museum/_doris_salcedo_on_pegaria_muda_2011/. Video produced for installation of *Plegaria Muda* at Moderna Museet, Malmö, posted by White Cube Gallery, 2011.

⁷ Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda*, 2011.

individualized coffins simultaneously provide a space to value each nameless victim as a means of counteracting the inhumanity of mass graves.⁸

A Flor de Piel stems from Salcedo's research into a Colombian nurse who was violently tortured and murdered during the ongoing civil war. Due to the dismemberment of her body, she failed to receive proper burial. Therefore, Salcedo aimed to create a flower offering in attempt to emulate the funerary ritual that was denied to her.⁹ She stated that *A Flor de Piel* visually represents the untouchable nature of a wound. The surgical suturing of rose petals counteracts the violent dismemberment of the nurse. Salcedo explained that "Suturing the petals is very important because it was a way to bring together all these parts ... violence destroys everything . . . torture destroys bodies. The idea is to bring them together and unite them and recover the force that they had."¹⁰

A History of Turmoil: Violence in Colombia

Born in Bogotá in 1958 and living there for most of her life, Salcedo came of age in war-torn Colombia, which has influenced her work. Salcedo states, "In all of my work, I have addressed only one issue: political violence . . . because I strongly believe that violence defines the ethos of our society, I have focused on political violence not simply because I am Colombian—which, in a way, gives me a deeper and close knowledge of its effects—but because of its more than sixty years in constant war."¹¹ Her country has suffered from armed strife for most of its history, enduring the longest-

⁸ Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda*, 2011.

⁹ Tim Marlow and Doris Salcedo, *On "A Flor de Piel" and "Plegaria Muda"* (White Cube Gallery, 2012). Video posted by White Cube, http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_gallery_past/doris_salcedo_on_a_flor_de_piel_and_plegaria_muda/.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Grynsztein and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 215.

running internal conflict in the Western Hemisphere.¹² This Colombian conflict consists of an ongoing war between the Colombian government, paramilitary groups, and left-wing guerillas, with the purpose of each conflicts varying depending upon the groups involved. For example, guerrilla groups claim that they fight for the protection of the Colombian people against the social injustice of the government, whereas the government argues that it aims to achieve stability and protect the rights of its citizens.¹³ The paramilitary groups formed in reaction to guerilla movements, but both groups have been accused of engaging in drug trafficking, resorting to violent, unjust acts such as extortion and kidnapping for financing.¹⁴

Conflicts between the leftist and right-wing parties resulted in two violent civil wars: The War of a Thousand Days (1899-1903) and The Violence (1946-1957). Although Salcedo was born one year after The Violence ended, the root causes of violence in Colombia remained: state neglect, poverty, and inequity in land distribution. Leftist guerrillas launched an insurgency in the 1960s that continued into the 1980s, when landowners and armed forces created paramilitary militias to counter the guerilla insurgency. This counter-insurgency and continual civil war coincided with the onset of Salcedo's artistic career, strongly impacting her worldview. Violence in Colombia continues to the present day; in the last twenty years, an estimated 70,000 civilians have been killed and more than 3 million have fled the country, marking Colombians as the second largest internally displaced population in the world.¹⁵

¹² *Colombia: Longest-Running Civil War in the Americas* (The Center for Justice and Accountability, 2013), <http://www.cja.org/article.php?list=type&type=400>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Salcedo's works attest to the artist's witnessing of Colombian violence. Sculptures dating from this time period are often described as surrogates for victims of violence: those murdered without proper burials or survivors beset by grief. Typically her forms suggest the haunting effects of violence through the use of anthropomorphized domestic objects or traces of clothing, bones, and human hair. For example, Salcedo's *Untitled* installation (1990) featured neatly folded starched shirts soiled by abject stains and violently pierced with steel rods (fig. 5). The work represents Colombian husbands and fathers who have disappeared, alluding to the haunting effects of loss that permeate the domestic sphere. In *Atrabilious* (1992-93), Salcedo created niches in the wall that housed the shoes of female victims of the Colombian Civil War (fig. 6). The artist sutured swaths of animal fiber over each compartment so that the objects remained in a forever-buried state; the shoes are metaphors for *los desaparacidos*—for bodies that have been forcibly vanished resulting in a profound sense of absence. This notion that loss impregnates all aspects of one's life after the disappearance of a beloved person informs most of Salcedo's early works. In the *Untitled* furniture works (1989-1995) (fig.7), fabric and lace details on the surfaces of armoires, beds and chairs, evoke a lost life that haunts the living sphere of the victim's loved ones (fig. 8). Salcedo filled these objects with concrete, rendering them functionless. The furniture series conjure the emotional disruption that occurs with this type of violence, embodying the anguish of grief.

A Shift in Salcedo's Oeuvre

Although Salcedo's sculptural work remains deeply rooted in her country's social and political landscape, she has progressively embraced more universal themes of

violence and suffering. While Salcedo's earlier works suggest a meticulous process of creation, references to the human form, and an awareness of space, I argue these qualities become heightened in her latest installations, which additionally reference healing for the first time through the incorporation of organic material. This shift perhaps coincides with Salcedo's growing international status as an artist. Not only did Salcedo continue to observe incessant violence in Colombia, but she also began witnessing violence in other countries as she increasingly exhibited worldwide, in cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. Perhaps due to this acknowledgment of the universal nature of violence, Salcedo increasingly focuses on the need to commemorate victims of suffering. Rather than solely portraying the effects of violence like her earlier works, I suggest that Salcedo's more recent installations become powerful tools for empathy. The replacement of found objects with organic material or the smoothing out of previously pierced surfaces in her later works point towards this shift, suggesting a more redemptive perspective that this thesis seeks to elucidate.

History of Scholarship on Doris Salcedo

The current scholarship on Salcedo's works is highly driven by theory and at times loses site of the viewer's interaction with the works. Critics of Salcedo's work tend to focus on similar conceptual themes, including violence, memory, absence, and mourning. When the viewer's experience is discussed, it is primarily in terms of the viewer serving as witness or the act of slow looking—a concept I expand upon in chapter three. Additionally, despite Salcedo's emphasis on her creative process as essential to the meaning of her works, the impact of such processes is seldom discussed. In contrast to these trends in the discourse on Salcedo, I argue that the viewer's corporeal experience

with the materiality of her installations and her process of creation must be considered when discussing her work.

In her dissertation, *Epic Forgetting: Mapping Memory Practices in Installation Art of the 1980s and 1990s*, Monica McTighe focuses on memory in Salcedo's *Artrabillarios* (1992-2004) and her untitled furniture pieces from the 1990s.¹⁶ She discusses the ways the viewer anticipates an intimate connection with Salcedo's sculpture, only to realize that they are mere material objects, failing to elicit empathy in viewers. Focusing on Salcedo's sculptural works from the 1990s, Cynthia Napoli-Abella reiterates this notion in her dissertation, claiming that the viewer only momentarily empathizes with the "other" referenced in Salcedo's sites of "failed mournings."¹⁷ My thesis coincides with Napoli-Abella's conclusions in that I argue that Salcedo's most recent works incite a stronger degree of empathy than her earlier works.

In her dissertation, art historian Elizabeth Adan examines Salcedo's earlier works of the 1990s in the context of feminist artists who promote ritualistic engagement.¹⁸ Adan argues that Salcedo's artworks activate public space that makes tangible the sense of violence. I similarly delve into Salcedo's use of ritual; however, I contend that a ritualistic language encourages an emotional response rather than highlighting violence.

In chapter one, I concentrate on the corporeal response to *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*, examining Salcedo's meticulous working method, her handmade aesthetics, and references to the human form. This theme is continued in chapter two, which focuses

¹⁶ Monica Eileen McTighe, "Epic Forgetting: Mapping Memory Practices in Installation Art of the 1980s and 1990s" (PhD diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 2005).

¹⁷ Cynthia Napoli-Abella, "Motherhood, Mourning, *Testimonio*, and the Representation of Silenced Histories" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2009).

¹⁸ Elizabeth Adan, "Matter, Presence, Image: The Work of Ritual in Contemporary Feminist Art" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2006).

on the ways in which Salcedo activates space through the use of installation in order to enhance the viewer's personal connection. Lastly, chapter three analyzes Salcedo's reference to ritual and healing, which is inherently connected to both body and performance. Ultimately, the incorporation of the body, interactivity, and ritual encourage the viewer to respond empathetically when interacting with the commemorative works.

CHAPTER ONE: ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND AN EMBODIED SUBJECT

I've always liked using the word creatures to describe my sculptures.

– Doris Salcedo, 2000.

Salcedo's works are frequently compared to those of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mona Hatoum, and Rachel Whiteread. Each of these artists utilizes installations that often incorporate the human form or interactivity in order to address bodies historically excluded from traditional social categories because of race, gender, status, or sexuality.¹⁹ As the artist suggests with the term "creature," Salcedo's works also often evoke the human form.²⁰ Human hair, bones, animal fiber, clothing, and anthropomorphic shapes are often included in Salcedo's oeuvre. Descriptions of her sculptural installations attest to their correlation with the body. For example, when discussing the artist's untitled furniture works, art critic Nancy Princenthal notes, "The furniture seems most indicative of absence when it is most literally flesh-like, that is when its figurative skin and bones are most exposed, vulnerable, and frail."²¹ Salcedo's *Unland: the Orphan's Tunic* (1997), one of three tables featured in the *Unland* series, consists of two wooden tables covered in a white tunic and sewn together with human hair through follicle-like drilled holes. It metaphorically represents a young girl who lost her parents to violence in Colombia.

¹⁹ Adan, "Matter, Presence, Image," n.p.

²⁰ Carlos Basualdo, Andreas Huyssen, and Nancy Princenthal. *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

When describing the work, Andreas Huyssen states, “If the tunic is like a skin, then the table gains a metaphoric presence as a body. . . .”²²

Art critic Mieke Bal’s description of Salcedo’s work as employing an “anthropomorphic imagination” attests to her use of the body as a means of attracting the viewer.²³ Bal writes, “Instead of representing either the people she seeks to put in the foreground, their suffering, or the violence done to them, she discreetly but no less insistently appeals to, and politically mobilizes, what I call the anthropomorphic imagination.”²⁴ According to Bal, the anthropomorphic imagination refers to a range of strategies in the visual arts that encourage the viewer to identify their own body with an artwork; she notes that the most obvious triggers for this identification are references to the human form and the artist’s hand.²⁵ Bal argues that Salcedo turns the anthropomorphic imagination into a tool for affective communication, utilizing the rhetoric to create works that physically and emotionally move the viewer.²⁶

Similar to Bal, I contend that Salcedo mobilizes the universal language of the body in order to entice the viewer to personally connect with her “creatures.” This chapter explores how Salcedo’s painstaking creative process, her insistence upon the handmade, and her subtle references to the human form encourage a corporeal, visceral interaction with *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*.

²² Basualdo, Huyssen and, Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 100.

²³ Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 87-88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

Salcedo's encouragement of meaningful engagements relates to the notion of an embodied subject—a feature of phenomenological philosophy in which subjectivity is dependent upon the correlation between the mind and the body. As Argentinean curator Carlos Basualdo argues in reference to Salcedo's works, “there is a strong phenomenological aspect to the encounter with the work . . . a communion between the victim and yourself.”²⁷ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty highlights the problematic nature of the Cartesian tradition—the seventeenth century philosophical system begun by the philosopher René Descartes—particularly the notion that the mind is wholly separate from the body. He notes that we perceive the world firstly through our bodies, which deny the detachment of subject from object and mind from body. Merleau-Ponty believes that perceptual consciousness directly relates to our bodily awareness of the world; in other words, in this embodied state of being, there is no interpretation of the world that exists outside the body's physical possibilities. Gray Brent Madison summarizes Merleau-Ponty's thoughts in his introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “I am an embodied subject only by being in a direct mutual relation with the world; and I am in the world only through my co-existence with others. I am directly linked to the world by a body which is inseparable from my existence.”²⁸

Sculptures with Human Presences

The human body heavily informs both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*. In the case of *Plegaria Muda*, Salcedo's signature usage of furniture implicitly points to a bodily presence. As noted by Princenthal,

²⁷ Basualdo, Huysen and, Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 18.

²⁸ Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: a Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 21.

The sizable role furniture has played in recent art can be accounted for, in part, by its neatly bifurcated significance: it both stands for the absence of the body, by so clearly indicating a place where it might be (but isn't) and at the same time anthropomorphically represents that missing body.

Plegaria Muda particularly suggests the human body as it evokes a chilling mass grave with crammed pairs of tables representing unidentified coffins (fig.9). However, upon closer inspection, each “grave” is bestowed with individual characteristics—varying degrees of weathered wood, grass growing in distinctive locations, and diverse shades of soil (fig.10). Slightly crooked table legs that vary in width evoke human limbs (fig. 11). Such individualization reflects Salcedo’s desire to honor the unburied dead by symbolically restoring the individuality of the thousands of victims that fill mass graves across Colombia, along with nameless victims of gang violence. Her sculptures symbolize individualized bodies, reinforced by their scale—each unit approximates the size of a standard coffin and therefore, the size of the human body.

A Flor de Piel additionally references the body. Salcedo created the work in homage to Colombian nurse who was murdered after providing care to injured parties on both sides of Colombia’s civil war. A substitute for the proper burial the nurse never received, *A Flor de Piel* represents a symbolic funeral offering to the victim.²⁹ The creation of *A Flor de Piel* stemmed from Salcedo contemplating how she could replicate the untouchable nature of a wound. In reference to her initial thoughts, she wondered, “how could I initiate even the slightest movement toward a tormented body, even if only to present a flower offering?”³⁰ The aesthetic choices of *A Flor de Piel* vividly reflect the skin of a wounded, tormented body, additionally evoked by the use of *piel* or “skin” in the title. The delicate rose petals with their veined membranes and their velvety texture

²⁹ Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 21.

³⁰ Grynstejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 217.

unsettlingly evoke human skin (fig. 12). Moreover, during the initial stages of the creation process, the originally pink rose petals were immersed in containers of dye, which causes them to appear drained of their naturally vibrant red hues. This results in muted tones of red that further connotes a sea of marred skin or dried blood.

As she had done with the sutures in stretched animal fiber in *Atrabiliarios* (1992-2004), the artist once again employed suturing in *A Flor de Piel*, identifying the rose petals with flesh. In *Atrabiliarios* (fig.6), Salcedo stitched transparent animal fiber to a clean gallery wall. In contrast, the sutures in *A Flor de Piel* evoke a more visceral response as the stitches pierce the surface of live, delicate rose petals. Hand-stitching individual petals together using surgical sutures suggests piecing together the parts of a dismembered body. As Salcedo comments on process, “Suturing the petals is very important because it was a way to bring together all these parts . . . to bring them together and unite them and recover the force that they had.” Viewed from above, the work recalls a bloodstained topography(fig.3).³¹ In addition to suggesting a tortured body, *A Flor de Piel* more tenderly connotes a burial shroud according to Salcedo; it wrinkles across the gallery floor and one can imagine a body previously placed or shortly to be placed underneath the relic-like “fabric” of roses.

Interacting with *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*: An Embodied Subject

These references to the body throughout *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* promote a visceral response that relates to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty argues that characteristics of the human world correlate with the physical limits of our bodily capacities. For example, he explains that when we

³¹ Nasher Sculpture Center, *Doris Salcedo: Inaugural Nasher Prize Laureate* (Dallas: Ussery Printing Company, 2016), n.p.

clasp a body with our hand, we conform the hand to the size and shape of the body without the need to think of these particular movements.³² He summarizes this when stating, “Spatial forms or distances are not so much relations between different points in objective space as they are relations between these points and a central perspective—our body.”

When interacting with *Plegaria Muda* and *Flor de Piel*, I noted a strong corporeal response I continually utilized my body as a reference point. Firstly, both of the works incite a visceral response. *Plegaria Muda* mobilizes the senses as the smell of live grass and soil permeates the air. Weaving through the installation, I imagined the soil’s texture, the smooth blades of grass, or the roughness of the wood. I experienced the work corporeally: the width of the tables were comparable to the width of my shoulders, the height of the stacked tables perfectly corresponded with my own height, and their length just a few inches longer than my body. My hips and the hips of other viewers were level with the upside down tabletop, at times causing only the top-half of our bodies to remain visible—a visual connoting half-buried bodies alongside the buried victims (fig.13).³³

While gazing at *A Flor de Piel*, I envisioned how it would feel to be wrapped in the vast shroud of soft rose petals. Moreover, the isolation of the work in an otherwise large, empty room and the shroud’s massive size cause the viewer to feel overwhelmingly miniscule in comparison to the installation. The contrast of the thick thread against the flattened petals that connote flesh encourage the viewer to imagine the pain of the stitches, heightened by the fragile status of the living petals (fig.12). Rooted in the language of the body, Salcedo’s sculptures are inherently personal, intimating a human

³² Nasher Sculpture Center, *Doris Salcedo: Inaugural Nasher Prize Laureate* (Dallas: Ussery Printing Company, 2016), n.p.

³³ Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, 133.

presence.³⁴ Despite the fact that the tragedies may be far removed from the average gallery visitor, the “human” qualities of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* and their encouragement of an embodied response as a means of experiencing the works persuades the viewer to personally engage with these objects.

Salcedo’s Process of Creation: Handmade Readymades

As Bal notes, the anthropomorphic imagination not only stems from references to the human figure, but additionally the artist’s use of her hand. Salcedo’s unique processes of creation further elicit a personal connection to her works. The surface of Salcedo’s sculptural works reveal the human mark; such visceral gestures once again strengthen the relationship between the viewer and the works.

Salcedo employed the readymade in her earliest works, incorporating found objects such as beds, armoires, and chairs. Similar to other artists of her generation such as Robert Gober and Rachel Whiteread, her incursions into the typically mass-produced tables of *Plegaria Muda* and her interference with naturally grown roses highlight her handwork.³⁵ Helen Molesworth, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, describes such works as “handmade readymades.”³⁶ For example, in her *Untitled* furniture series, Salcedo filled found armoires with concrete, roughening the surfaces through subtle scraping (fig. 7). However, in her most recent works, she increasingly incorporates handmade qualities, eliminating the readymade. In both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*, she replaces the inherently charged found object with handmade creations, placing weight on her actions rather than the found object itself.

³⁴ Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 187.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Due to the chronological arrangement of the Guggenheim retrospective, it was evident that Salcedo not only increasingly emphasizes the handmade in her later works, but she additionally insists upon laborious acts of creation. The *Unland* series (1995-98) marks this noticeable shift. The three tables (fig.14), with thousands of strands of human hair hand-sewn through perforated holes in the wooden tabletops, underscore the painstaking labor that the artist intentionally disguised in previous works. This insistence upon the meticulously handmade is epitomized in both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*. For example, in *Plegaria Muda*, Salcedo handcrafted up to 166 tables, rather than utilizing found tables. Furthermore, Salcedo ensured their individualization through sanding, varying the contours of the soil, and threading grass through drilled holes that appear naturally random.

A Flor de Piel additionally highlights the handmade. Salcedo and her crew spent months processing the rose petals, preserving, flattening, and sealing each individual petal by hand (fig. 15). The petals were then sutured together; assistants greased the needle before each suture in order to avoid damaging the fragile flowers. During this process of quilting the petals, Salcedo selected thick surgical thread and insisted that assistants create *random* patterns rather than organized ones. These qualities distance the suturing from the sterile, orderly, and often invisible sewing of a machine.

Juxtaposing the Present and Absent Body

Plegaria Muda and *A Flor de Piel* illustrate an intertwining of the present and absent body of both the victim of violence *and* the artist's body via Salcedo's emphasis on discernible handwork. The suggestions of the victim's body, along with only traces of the artist's body via her subtle handmade gestures, allows the viewer to more readily

empathize with the suffering Salcedo's works evoke. In other words, the intentional exclusion of any literal representations of bodies allows the viewer to more easily connect their own bodies, and therefore their own personal experiences of loss, with the corporal themes.

In *Plegaria Muda*, Salcedo was inspired by events in which the victims were treated as anonymous and failed to receive proper mourning. The hand weathered, anthropomorphized tables evoke a coffin and indicate the presence of a body; however, upon closer inspection, the "content" of the coffin is merely a layer of soil. Coffins that lack actual bodies, the notion of a mass grave, and the suggestion that the tables could soon be camouflaged by overgrown grass all suggest the absent body—a nod to the phenomenon of *los desaparecidos*.

In the case of *A Flor de Piel*, the work evokes the re-stitching of the Colombian nurse's body so that it is symbolically whole, yet simultaneously, the fabric of petals evokes merely the exterior skin, highlighting the missing living body. The absence of a human body, substituted by mere traces of a symbolic body through Salcedo's gestures of the handmade and references to the human form allows the installations to signal a violated body and a general evocation of suffering. The juxtaposition of absence and presence with an overall exclusion of a literal representation of a body allows viewers to empathize with the suffering symbolically represented in these installations. Throughout her oeuvre, Salcedo insists upon this exclusion of literal representations of violence. As Nancy Princenthal states, "bodies of victims are never shown, yet viewers are made keenly aware of traces they have left on domestic furniture. Similarly, the instruments of abuse are not given: there are no weapons of any kind and there is no direct

representation of perpetrators.”³⁷ A literal depiction of a victim of violence serves as a document that clearly outlines the details of a tragedy, dictating to the viewer for whom to mourn for under circumscribed events. By subtly addressing themes of violence through the suggestion of absence and slight references to a human presence, Salcedo’s later installations allow the viewer to associate their own personal experiences of loss or suffering with the indications of affliction displayed in the works. This encourages a more sincere feeling of empathy rather than an imposed message articulated in the works.

Although Salcedo continues to include the handmade and alludes to individualized victims, particularly through the labels, these later installations become more universal and less literal in order to encourage this personal connection. Salcedo further promotes this empathetic connection by stripping the works entirely of found materials such as clothing, bones, human hair, and animal fiber that dominate her earlier singular works. These found items tied the works to a particular past; for example, viewer’s may imagine who the white shirt belonged to in *La Casa Viuda III* (fig. 16) or who previously owned the bed frame in her *Untitled* furniture work (fig. 7). Salcedo avoids this in *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* by eliminating the personalized found objects and through the balance of an absent and present body.

Salcedo additionally avoids representations that too closely reveal her own body or input. She the creation of her works necessitates physical and mental sacrifice, yet the surfaces of her work only reveal traces of this process. She often comments upon a work’s autonomy once it leaves her studio: “when works leave my studio they no longer have anything to do with me I acquire a distant view of my works . . . each work has

³⁷ Basualdo, Huyssen, and Princethal, and Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo*, 23.

to find its proper place in the world.”³⁸ Salcedo aims to instigate a “communion” between the viewing public and the symbolic victims by creating surfaces that “reverberate no specific character.” As Princenthal comments, “Salcedo replaces that missing body with the viewer’s own presence, who confronts the objects.”³⁹

This effect of Salcedo’s works is comparable to the works of Janine Antoni. Antoni comments upon the exclusion of her physical body in *Lick and Lather* (fig.17), a sculptural work that consists of self-portrait busts made of chocolate and soap, sculpted through licking and bathing in the privacy of her studio. Removing her actual body by creating the work in private and prohibiting documentary photos, the artist states, “That removal creates a place for the viewer. Imagining is much more powerful than watching me do it and makes each viewer’s story slightly different. I want to put the viewer into a particular relationship with the objects. I am instead interested in extreme acts that pull you in.”⁴⁰ Similar to the works of Antoni, the juxtaposition of the absent and present body within *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* solicit the spectator through suggestions of the body, but the removal of recognizable individuals pulls the viewer further into the works. As such, Salcedo shifts individualized incidents of trauma into the realm of the collective public. Ultimately, Salcedo’s choices relating to the body permit the viewer to confront the works according to their own personal associations which encourages a more empathetic response.

³⁸ Basualdo, Huyssen, and Princenthal, and Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁰ Janine Antoni, “Interview with Stuart Horodner,” in *BOMB Magazine*, 66 (Winter 1999), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2191/janine-antoni>.

CHAPTER TWO: INSTALLATION ART AND INTERACTIVITY

The image is not finished in my studio; I complete it in situ, in the very space where the viewer will encounter it. What I propose is that everything that takes place occurs within the viewer's own space... what the viewers might come to feel, to remember, or to comprehend, is entirely dependent on their internal code.

– Doris Salcedo, 1998.

As discussed in chapter one, Salcedo utilizes an “internal code” to engage the viewer with *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*.⁴¹ She considers the viewer's interaction within the space of the works as crucial to their completion.⁴² As suggested by Salcedo's emphasis on space, rather than individual sculptural works, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* can be considered site-specific installations that “activate” viewers. This chapter addresses the ways in which Salcedo maximizes the viewer's relationship with the works through an interactive installation space. The installations demand the viewer's prolonged, focused attention. It is this *endless care* that remains crucial to the works' meaning; the viewer's interaction becomes an extension of Salcedo's own care of the sculptures. Her painstaking studio practices extend into the public realm—into the viewer's space—so that they too must attend to the works, symbolically continuing the commemorative task Salcedo begins in the privacy of her studio.

Some art critics note the importance of the viewer's physical interaction with Salcedo's earlier works. For example, when discussing *Unland* (1997), Huyssen states, “Sculpture expanded toward installation relies on the tradition of the sculpted human

⁴¹ Carlos Basualdo, “Interview with Doris Salcedo,” in *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 142.

⁴² *Ibid.*

body . . . Doris Salcedo thus performs a kind of memory work that activates body, space, temporality, matter and imagination, presence and absence in a complex relationship with their beholder.”⁴³ Adan reiterates this notion, writing, “Salcedo’s sculptures and installations can be understood in part to create mimetic relationships between artworks and viewers . . . a kinesthetic contact between the material shape the artworks give to space and the physical sensory experiences of viewers’ bodies in that space.”⁴⁴ In reference to Salcedo’s more recent works in her retrospective exhibition, Madeleine Grynsztejn, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, claims that the museum becomes a stage for the viewer’s performance.”⁴⁵

I argue that *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* fit within the category of installation art more so than her earlier sculptures. According to art critic Claire Bishop, installation art is a term that loosely refers to the type of work into which the viewer physically enters a space.⁴⁶ It is often described as theatrical, immersive, or experiential.”⁴⁷ These concepts relating to installation art begin to emerge during the 1960s in association with minimalist objects by artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre. Although these artists did not consider their works to be installation art (labeled environments at the time), they did acknowledge the importance of their works’ placement within actual space.⁴⁸ For example, in his “Notes on Sculpture” (1966), Morris discusses how the art object has become less “self-important” in that the unfixed variables of its surroundings equally contribute to the piece; this

⁴³ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 110.

⁴⁴ Adan, “Matter, Presence, Image,” 188.

⁴⁵ Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 13.

⁴⁶ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

includes space, light, and the viewer's changing perception. He states, "in much of the new work . . . placement becomes critical as it never was before in establishing the particular quality of the work."⁴⁹ Critics often attested to the heightened awareness of space that was "undeniably environmental" in Minimalist exhibitions.⁵⁰

Plegaria Muda and *A Flor to Piel* can be considered installation art due to Salcedo's attention towards the specific exhibition sites and her emphasis on the viewer's presence within these spaces. In *Plegaria Muda*, the nature of the exhibition space determines the number of included tables, along with the pattern of their arrangement. For example, when installed at the MAXXI National Museum in Rome in 2012, *Plegaria Muda* consisted of 122 paired tables (fig.9), whereas its most recent installation at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas featured just 33 tables made specifically for the space (fig.18). Months before the retrospective exhibition, the Guggenheim received *Plegaria Muda* in order to plant each table with seeds of grass. These seeds were then watered daily so that the blades pierced through the tables before the exhibition's opening. Special lighting was installed within the gallery ceiling in order to encourage the continued growth of the grass (fig. 19). Salcedo arranged the tables in a calculated fashion based upon the layout of the gallery. Two large columns on either side of the space dictated their arrangement, as tables tightly surrounded their bases (fig. 12). Due to the nurturing of the grass in-situ and the ways in which each installation differs depending on the gallery space, each iteration of *Plegaria Muda* can be considered site-specific.

A Flor de Piel similarly depends upon the nature of the exhibition space. Salcedo aimed to replicate the untouchable nature of a painful wound; the artist describes how

⁴⁹ Morris, Robert. "Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 & 2," reprinted in Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 235.

⁵⁰ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 56.

touching the piece causes the petal fabric to tear apart—a fragility essential to the meaning of the work. Therefore, *A Flor de Piel* must be delicately installed with a team of individuals wearing gloves. Due to this immense delicateness, Salcedo recreates the pieces for subsequent exhibitions. For example, the artist first exhibited *A Flor de Piel*, measuring approximately twenty feet by thirty-five feet, in 2012 at the White Cube Gallery in London. The Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art featured a different version of *A Flor de Piel* in 2014 (thirty-seven by twenty-one feet). These works appear nearly identical, with subtle variations in their color tones. However, similar to *Plegaria Muda*, the installation of the work heavily relies upon the gallery space, resulting in variations in the ways it folds across the floor and its overall form. For example, the version installed at the Guggenheim retrospective appeared to bleed from underneath the far left corner of the room, seeping back under the gallery walls in various areas. Salcedo carefully crafted the folding of the fabric so that it appears to leak into the gallery space towards the viewer. Because the work often curves along the borders of the gallery, the location strongly informs its configuration.

The Viewer’s Space: Increasingly Interactive Qualities

According to critics such as Bishop, the key to installation art is an insistence upon the viewer’s literal presence.⁵¹ She states, “Installation art differs from traditional media in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. . . . Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision.”⁵² As chapter one argues, the works

⁵¹ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*

enhance an embodied response through their suggestions of the human form and their handmade details. Salcedo further heightens the viewer's "literal presence in the space" due to her arrangement of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*. These works notably differed from the other sculptures in her retrospective exhibition due to their emphasis on the viewer's space. For example, her earlier works such as *Untitled* (1989-90), featuring steel bed frames (fig. 20), or *La Casa Viuda* series, displaying disjointed wooden furniture, exist as individualized, singular entities (fig. 16). The viewer walks up to the object and then moves onto the next adjacent sculpture in the room. *Unland* (1995-1998) suggested a shift in this pattern, as it featured three tables alone in the gallery, treating the room as an installation space and thereby encouraging the viewer to weave in, out, and between the works in order to examine their details (fig. 14).

Plegaria Muda extends the interactive qualities Salcedo began exploring in *Unland*. The installation of the tables allowed just enough room for visitors to wind in between them. Viewers walked down one pathway, examining the individualized details of the soil and growing grass within each paired table. At times the viewer could choose to turn left or right, while other pathways ended in a "roadblock" table obstructing his or her movement, forcing the viewer to retrace his or her steps. Because of the overwhelming number of tables jammed into a small space, along with the upright table legs that often obstructed one's view, weaving throughout the cluttered installation required the viewer's alertness (fig.21). The installation ensured that the viewer approached the objects with vigilance due to the possibility of mistakenly touching the fragile works. The juxtaposition between guiding and interrupting movement causes the viewer to move slowly within the installation space with a heightened sense of his or her

physical movements. This elicits a prolonged interaction with *Plegaria Muda*. Because it fills an entire gallery room and due to its encouragement of interactivity, multiple viewers can experience the installation simultaneously (fig. 22).

Salcedo additionally subtly activates the installation space of *A Flor de Piel*. After experiencing the previous galleries often cluttered with dense sculptural works, the viewer walks through a tight corridor that opens up into a large trapezoid-shaped room. The artist installed *A Flor de Piel* at the far back end of an empty gallery so that it appears to extend into the viewer's space. Salcedo's thoughtful installation forces the viewer to walk up to this grandiose object from a far distance, eventually blocked by a small metal bar that separates the viewer from the beginning of the shroud. Due to its massive size (thirty-seven feet by twenty feet) and its placement in the back of the gallery, the details of the piece only come into focus when the viewer stands directly in front of it. The viewer must stare for a prolonged period of time in order to absorb the haunting yet captivating intricacies of the approximately 250,000 rose petals. This process mimics the ritualistic approach to a sacred altar as well as "slow-looking," concepts discussed in chapter three. *A Flor de Piel* offered a place of pause in contrast to the otherwise dense exhibition spaces. Multiple viewers congregated for extended periods of time in the gallery, in various states of contemplation.

Due to the fact that the viewer enters a designated space that encourages interaction, his or her presence becomes a crucial component of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*. Due to this direct interaction, the viewer's experience is markedly different from that of traditional painting and sculpture.⁵³ The viewer's presence is essential to

⁵³ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 11.

installation art. Bishop explains, “Instead of *representing* texture, or space, or light, installation art *presents* these elements directly for us to experience . . . this introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation, and on a heightened awareness of other visitors who become part of the piece.”⁵⁴

Installation Art as “Meeting Points”

An emphasis on installation and the viewer’s presence in *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* coincides with Salcedo’s interest in addressing political violence by creating spaces that encourage contemplative experiences with her presented themes. These aims reflect the impact of twentieth-century German artist Joseph Beuys on Salcedo’s works; the artist is cited as strongly influencing Salcedo throughout the onset of her career.⁵⁵ When asked about her relationship to Beuys, Salcedo answered, “Encountering his work revealed to me the concept of social sculpture—the possibility of giving form to society through art.”⁵⁶ Bishop cites Beuys as a precursor of contemporary installation art due to his consideration of dialogue and direct communication as artistic materials in his social sculptures.⁵⁷ Beuys maintained that art could provide a space of “playful activity” free of the means-ends relationships of capitalism; he therefore proposed that political activity should be reconceived as artistic practice.⁵⁸ When Basualdo asked Salcedo to expand upon how Beuys influenced her, the artist explained, “The only thing that was important to me was space. . . . My interest in the space of sculpture was in the way it can represent a crossroad, a *meeting point*.”⁵⁹ Similar to Beuys, Salcedo maintains that art has the

⁵⁴ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 11.

⁵⁵ Basualdo, Huyssen, and Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 106.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁹ Basualdo, Huyssen, and Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 10.

potential to impact the public's conscience, particularly by offering "meeting points" or spaces for the viewer that encourage a dialogue on social trauma and political violence. This consideration of Salcedo in the context of Beuys' social sculpture elucidates Salcedo's impetus for increasingly emphasizing space in her later works.

A Continued Interest in Space: Extension of Salcedo's Public Works

In the way that they encourage interaction and allow congregations of people to collectively experience them, Salcedo's latest installations correlate with her engaging public works. The artist completed her first public piece in 1999 in order to commemorate Jaime Garzón, a journalist and peace activist who was assassinated in Colombia. She and a group of artists nailed a line of roses against the wall, across the street from his home (fig.23). Salcedo considers this her first "public intervention."⁶⁰ A year later, Salcedo, along with Garzón's brother and sister, created a long line of roses from the victim's house to the point where he was killed (fig.24). Salcedo explained, "It took all day . . . we very slowly walked along in a really solemn way; that was a really complete work for me."⁶¹ As she continues to create these site-specific installations, the artist increasingly incorporates the public. She states, "Public works are extremely demanding...there are more elements that interact; it's not just what I perceive or want to address, but whatever happens in the city and the memory of each viewer of each space so the relationship is richer; it is exciting to see what the public does."⁶² For example,

⁶⁰ Doris Salcedo, *Public Works* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2015), <http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/videos/publicworks/>. Video produced for Doris Salcedo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Guggenheim, posted by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

⁶¹ Doris Salcedo, *Public Works* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago), 2015.

⁶² Ibid.

Salcedo installed *Shibboleth* (2007) in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, forcing viewers to cross over a makeshift crack that stretched the width of the space (fig. 25).

When considering Salcedo's extensive interest in public works that incorporate time-extensive performative qualities and the artist's interest in activating space, the intended effect of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* becomes more apparent. It is as if these works fuse Salcedo's more singular sculptural works with qualities taken from her public performative works. She now aims to vigorously engage the public within the museum space. Her most recent project (a work in progress), *Palimpsest*, demonstrates a culmination of this blend of individualized artworks and engaging the public (fig. 26). The work proposes the creation of a plaza in which drops of water emerge from custom made concrete, gradually forming the names of victims of gun violence. In each case, the watery text emerges over the barely legible traces of a second victim's name hand-painted on the concrete. The water would be swept away by the feet of pedestrians, only to eventually resurface. Located in a public plaza, individuals passing by would be forced to engage with the work by stepping over these names. *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* seem to be precursors to the highly interactive *Palimpsest*.

Salcedo shares her empathy with the public by suggesting that they too can learn to connect personally with such horrific tragedies. Just as Salcedo demands that each work should be created through a process of intensive labor—a private “interaction” by the artist within her studio space—she ensures an extension of this scrupulous process into the public domain by encouraging a physical, engaged interaction from the viewer. The works become activated once the viewer engages with them. Salcedo explains this notion:

Once the piece is finished, it becomes completely autonomous from me. It is this autonomous relationship that establishes a dialogue with the spectator...the viewer may find something in the work that triggers his or her own memories of sorrow, or some personal recollection. It is during this unique moment of beholding that the viewer may enter, as I did, into communion with the victim's experience. The artwork fully manifests itself in that moment.⁶³

Similar to her public works, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* can be considered sites where the public congregates and can potentially experience personal connections. As installation spaces that encourage an engaged, attentive reaction with the works, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* perhaps can be seen as an extension of this performative work; the viewer's interactive engagement with these commemoratives installations function similarly to the attentive, continual gesture Salcedo makes towards the symbolic candles.

Many critics argue that the emphasis on interaction in installation art "activates" the viewer, in contrast to art that merely requires optical contemplation (which is considered detached and passive).⁶⁴ Rather than allow memories of suffering to live only within the private sphere of the consciousness of survivors, Salcedo transforms repressive suffering so often associated with violence into an issue with which the public can actively and empathetically engage. As explained in chapter three, additional qualities of the works reiterate an empathetic experience characterized by the viewer's prolonged care—particularly the ritual-like qualities that enhance a sense of mourning.

⁶³ Basualdo, Huysen, and Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 17.

⁶⁴ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 11.

CHAPTER THREE: THE LANGUAGE OF RITUAL

Being in a violent country, you cannot act as though violence is not happening and that's why I think art has to somehow create a balance. It is a space that is outside all this brutal loss . . . here you can create art that might create some *meaning*.

–Doris Salcedo, 2015.

This chapter explores how the viewer's experience *and* Salcedo's processes of creation incorporate ritual in order to further the viewer's empathetic experience with the installations. Although the artist explicitly recognizes the inability of an artwork to end violence or to heal affliction, this engaged, ritual-like experience with objects that commemorate victims simulates rituals of mourning that function as a means of catharsis despite the perseverance of violence. The works achieve this symbolic atonement particularly through the language of ritual, which is made possible due to the encouragement of an embodied experience and interactivity as discussed in chapters one and two. Katherine Brinson, curator of contemporary art at the Guggenheim, concisely summarizes this commemorative effect of Salcedo's later works:

Convinced that the gravity and compassion with which we observe mourning practices are central to our humanity, Salcedo quietly but implacably insists that the suffering of these victims will not be effaced. Her affirmation of mourning as an ethical duty reflects the principle that grief, while in some ways an intensely introspective state, must also be a communal impulse in which societal bonds are forged and tended.⁶⁵

While Brinson recognizes the importance of collective mourning, this chapter will explore how the *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* incorporate ritual as a means of

⁶⁵ Katherine Brinson, "The Muted Drum: Doris Salcedo's Material Elegies," in *Doris Salcedo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.209.

enhancing the viewer's empathy towards the themes presented in the works, using language that evokes mourning and acts of atonement.

While ritual frequently relates to religious practices, scholars have increasingly examined how ritual extends into the secular realm.⁶⁶ This chapter relies upon this extended notion of ritual activities that occur across various cultural contexts. As a testament to its expansion outside of a religious framework, ritualistic behavior is often seen as linked with political and social change. For example, anthropologist David Kertzer notes that ritual serves as a major means for propagating political myths.⁶⁷ As Salcedo's works predominantly stem from socio-political issues related to violence, the transformative effect of ritual and its associations with politics coincide with the artist's core themes. Kertzer's description provides the basic qualities that define ritual: "Ritual action follows highly structured, standardized sequences and is often enacted at certain places and times endowed with special symbolic meaning. Ritual action is repetitive but these very factors serve as important means of guiding cognition, and organizing social groups."⁶⁸ Ritual typically involves active participation, which contributes to its force.⁶⁹

Art historians and critics have briefly connected Salcedo's works with ritual. For example, art historian Charles Merewether states that Salcedo creates "a site of ritual through which the experience and memory of loss can be redeemed."⁷⁰ The artist herself states, "In my work I try to juxtapose ritual space with the space of sculpture...art can restore the dignity which has been ripped away from the victims at the time of their

⁶⁶ Adan, "Matter, Presence, Image," 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁰ Charles Merewether, "Zones of Marked Instability: Woman and the Space of Emergence," in *Rethinking Borders*, ed. John C. Welchman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 263.

violent death.”⁷¹ Brinson specifically connects *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* to ritual, yet fails to expand upon this relationship. She states that in both works, Salcedo shifts from “the stymied existence endured by survivors to the creation of ritualistic gestures of memorial.”⁷² Adan’s dissertation is the only example that details Salcedo’s use of ritual. However, she solely discusses Salcedo’s works from the 1990s, primarily focusing on their encouragement of a kinesthetic interaction from the viewer.

Sacred Sites: Art Museum as Ritual

In the “The Art Museum as Ritual,” Duncan notes that art museums have historically been perceived as “sacred” settings structured around ritualistic behavior.⁷³ Such institutions often borrow architectural forms typical of ceremonial structures used for rituals: corridors for processions, halls for communal gatherings, and “sanctuaries” designed for effigies.⁷⁴ Duncan notes that, as in the performances of any ritual, viewers are expected to behave with a certain decorum in a museum.⁷⁵ Therefore, on one level, Salcedo’s works are inherently connected to ritual through their installation in museums. On another level, they are associated with ritual due Salcedo’s repetitive processes and her emphasis on the body and interactivity, as both the body and performance are frequently linked to ritual. Adan attests to this, stating, “ritual practices employ what can be seen as mimetic activities, activities that conjoin and collide senses of touch, embodiment, and/or the body with visual images and representation more generally.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ Maria Margarita Malagon, “Art as indexical presence. The work of three Colombian artists in times of violence: Beatriz Gonzalez, Oscar Munoz and Doris Salcedo in the 1990s” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2006), 618.

⁷² Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 209-210.

⁷³ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁶ Adan, “Matter, Presence, Image,” 74.

Art historians frequently connect body art with ritual. Beginning with body art of the 1960s, artists utilized ritualistic performances in order to violate social taboos as a means of catharsis; these actions at times mimicked religious practices.⁷⁷ Cuban artist Ana Mendieta exemplified this trend; through the use of her body, she often referenced Afro-Cuban religious practices of Santería or fertility rituals in order to address issues regarding gender and violence.

Ritual additionally incorporates interactive components. Adan summarizes the incorporation of both the body and action when stating that ritual is “a practice that does not simply describe or delineate various social concepts or cultural formations, but literally enacts them...ritual as an active practice also explicitly involves the work of behaviors of the body.”⁷⁸ Duncan additionally connects ritual to performance, stating, “I see the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind.”⁷⁹ She argues that the museum’s sequenced spaces, arrangements of objects, and dramatic lighting serve as a guided route for the viewer.⁸⁰ Therefore, when considering the emphasis on an interactive experience in *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* and their careful placement within the museum—a space traditionally tied to ritual—the works set up viewers for a ritual-like response.

Ritual and Salcedo’s Process of Creation

In her discussion on body art, Amelia Jones explains, “ritualized actions often mimic traditional religions and cults and can at times present a highly theatrical view of

⁷⁷ Jones and Warr, *The Artist’s Body*, 92.

⁷⁸ Adan, “Matter, Presence, Image,” 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

the artist's role as shaman, capable of redeeming society."⁸¹ Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović's performance work entitled *Balkan Baroque* (1997) (fig. 27) demonstrates this performance of ritual and the artist as "shaman." For five days, the artist sat on a pile of 1,500 bloody beef bones, each day washing them one by one for six hours. The piece is a response to the violent civil wars that mark the Balkans—a gesture of repetitive, ritual-like mourning. Salcedo's methods maintain commonalities with the ritual-like processes enacted by Abramović, similarly utilizing physical ritual-like acts as a means of coping with violence. Unlike Abramović, she takes a more subtle approach by carrying out her "performance" in the privacy of her studio. However, her laborious, attentive gestures are manifest in the materiality of the works so that the viewer is keenly aware of such processes. Labor is inherently tied to ritual, particularly repetitive labor. According to Adan, ritual is above all a "human labor" that relies on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities.⁸²

While Salcedo typically creates challenging works, she amplified the arduousness involved in creating both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* so that it emotionally and physically burdened her. The ritual-like creation of the works mimics acts of absolution—a form of penance—as a means of appropriately mourning the suffering Salcedo references. She considers the process as integral to the piece itself, as it ultimately contributes to their status as tools for cathartic grief. The challenge of creating both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* is immediately evident upon noting the excessive repetition. Salcedo's body of works progressively display these repetitive qualities; her earliest *Untitled* works dating from the 1980s (fig. 28) exist primarily as singular objects

⁸¹ Jones and Warr, *The Artist's Body*, 92.

⁸² Adan, "Matter, Presence, Image," 9.

and her signature *Untitled* furniture works (fig. 5), although repeating similar themes, ultimately stand as individual units. Works such as her untitled stacks of white starched shirts (1989- 90), *Atrabiliarios* (1992-2004), (fig. 6), and *Noviembre 6 y 7* (2002), (fig. 39) all demonstrate traces of repetition, but fail to jointly combine repetition, the handmade, and labor to the extent evident in *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*.

Both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* involved extensive research into the subject matter before making the works.⁸³ For *Plegaria de Muda*, Salcedo described the process of investigation as “painstaking.”⁸⁴ As stated in the introduction, although the first version of *A Flor de Piel* was completed in 2011, the research process began in 2004 when Salcedo, for months, accompanied Colombian mothers searching for their disappeared sons and identifying them in unmarked graves.⁸⁵ She additionally investigated gang violence in L.A., which similarly took months of personally submersing herself within the violent context.⁸⁶ In both works, their creation involved researching how to achieve the seemingly impossible: the preservation of organic materials despite being plucked from their original roots. In the case of *A Flor de Piel*, the preservation of live rose petals involved a lengthy collaboration with scientists. For months, the team investigated how to preserve the flexibility of a petal; they discovered that soaking the petals for ten days in a solution of 50% glycerin and 50% collagen, through a process of osmosis, allowed the flowers to maintain their pliant texture (fig. 30).⁸⁷ *Plegaria Muda* similarly involved a methodical process of trial and error due to the complexities of growing grass within a nonliving object. The grass required constant

⁸³ Grynstejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 212.

⁸⁴ Doris Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda* (White Cube Gallery), 2011.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Doris Salcedo, *The Making of “A Flor de Piel”* (White Cube Gallery), 2012.

attention, its growth monitored months in advance before being inserted into the tables. In the gallery setting, the piece requires daily watering and special lighting (fig. 19).

Constructing the works involved extensive physical labor. For example, the process of suspending 250,000 petals in an indefinite “living” state involved multiple methodical procedures. Each rose petals was individually treated, flattened, and sewed in a highly particular manner (fig. 31). Sewing in itself was a multi-step procedure, utilizing various types of thread and hand placing each petal in order to ensure a natural, handmade effect (fig. 15). The artist noted the arduous nature of the work, describing it as “the most difficult challenge I have ever encountered.”⁸⁸ *Plegaria Muda* similarly involved laborious handiwork. Salcedo at times installed over one hundred pairs of tables, each involving the drilling of thousands of miniscule holes each pierced by fragile grass—a tremendously strenuous process due to the fragility of the material (fig. 32).

Salcedo’s process of creation, which involves an excessive repetition of a sequence of acts, points towards the ritual-like qualities of both works. The repetitive qualities are also evident when viewing the works, which appear enormous in scale. The often mindless, repetitiveness of sewing itself traditionally alludes to ritualistic healing, particularly relevant to Latin American traditions. For example, following a horrific massacre by paramilitary in Bojayá, Colombia in 2002, Augustine sisters began a sewing workshop, inviting groups to gather and sew together as a means of sharing their pain while participating in a joint activity.⁸⁹ In general, the sewing of funerary shrouds is historically a crucial component to the rituals of mourning. Similar to the groups of individuals sewing in Bojayá as a means of coping with tragedy, Salcedo and her crew

⁸⁸ Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 2016.

⁸⁹ Sandra Milena Rios Oyola, *Religion, Social Memory and Conflict: The Massacre of Bojayá in Colombia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), n.p.

jointly work together in the studio space, highly focused on their assigned procedure (fig. 33). This group working collectively towards an end goal additionally mimics religious ritual. It recalls the common practice of monks at times spending their entire lives writing manuscripts in scriptoria throughout the Middle Ages—a physically and emotionally taxing procedure. The crafting manuscripts was considered an act of meditative devotion partially due its cathartic qualities.

Throughout her creative process, Salcedo not only emphasizes ritual-like repetition, but she additionally highlights their arduous nature that equates them to acts of absolution or penance. Her mentally draining procedures become essential to the success of the works. She attests to this when stating, “I begin my work with an idea of producing a *miracle* . . . it is impossible in terms of time, or technique, or physicality.”⁹⁰ Whereas earlier works stressed violent pain in their aesthetics (bones and dolls tightly wrapped with animal fiber, disjointed hospital beds, starched shirts soiled by abject stains, entrapped shoes of victims buried into the wall), Salcedo now replaces visual representations of pain by experiencing a form of pain herself—a projection of the victim’s suffering onto the artist’s own body: a personal sacrifice for those who have suffered. In reference to the victim of violence, Salcedo states, “In a way, I become that person, there is a process of substitution. . . their suffering becomes mine; the work develops from that experience.”⁹¹ She stretches herself to the edge of her capabilities in order to appropriately commemorate those who have suffered. As Bal astutely observes, “Labor as aesthetic strategy is an attempt to share the suffering of others . . . the phrase

⁹⁰ Doris Salcedo, *The Making of “A Flor de Piel”* (White Cube Gallery), 2012.

⁹¹ Basualdo, Huyssen, and Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 14.

labor of love has never been more aptly and sadly applicable.”⁹² In a video outlining the creation of *A Flor de Piel*, Salcedo similarly states: “I was convinced I was failing every day; I was never delicate enough, never intelligent enough; it kept destroying itself; it was confronting me with all of my inabilities.”⁹³ In this way, similar to the ritual-like endurance of pain in Abramović’s *Balkan Baroque*, Salcedo’s process in these works reflects notions of sacrifice often associated with ritual. Self-sacrifice is central to religious rituals as highlighted by traditions such as the Eucharist, penance, suffering martyrs, and the manuscript writing of monks.

Salcedo’s increasing emphasis on ritual-like processes relates to the creation of the works as acts of mourning in themselves. She allows herself to absorb the losses of strangers, transforming this empathy into the works. In reference to an *Untitled* work (1989), consisting of a steel crib wrapped with steel mesh, Salcedo explains that it is a response to an account she read of a mother finding her son’s body after a massacre in Segovia and bringing him home where she lovingly began the rituals of mourning: slowly cleaning his wounded body and dressing him in his best clothes as a means of properly saying goodbye.⁹⁴ Similarly to the mother’s caring gestures toward her son, the painstaking creation of *Plegaria Muda*, a symbolic mass grave, and *A Flor de Piel*, a symbolic burial shroud or offering, evoke the mourning rituals associated with burying a loved one. In reference to *A Flor de Piel*, Salcedo states, “I originally began with the intention of making a flower offering to a victim of torture in an attempt to perform the funerary *ritual* that was denied to her.” When explaining the process of *A Flor de Piel*, Salcedo’s assistant described the preservation of organic materials as a process of

⁹² Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, 27.

⁹³ Doris Salcedo, *The Making of “A Flor de Piel”* (White Cube Gallery), 2012.

“mummification”—a substitution of moisture with particular chemicals as means of preservation of a symbolic body of roses, similar to the rituals of honoring the dead involving the preparation of the body.⁹⁵

A Transfer of Ritual from Artist to Viewer

Just as Salcedo’s involved creative process suggests care towards victims of violence, the artist also invites viewers to empathetically engage with the works. The artist ensures that the works are attentively cared for within the museum setting so that they continue to appropriately commemorate the suffering they represent. Mirroring Salcedo’s focus in creating these works, viewers can devote their attention in a ritual-like manner. This attentive response is firstly evident in the inherent fragility of the works—an idea that Salcedo considers essential and parallel to her conceptual approach. *Plegaria Muda*, for example, requires daily watering and specialized lights to encourage the grass to grow. In regards to *A Flor de Piel*, the rose petals deteriorate when handled and Salcedo claims even the breath or the passing by of a visitor can cause the petals to deteriorate. She states that the insubstantial nature of the work “shows us how fragile another human being can be...if we were capable of understanding this fragility implicit in life, we would be better human beings.” The idea of *A Flor de Piel*’s delicacy is reinforced by the constant care each installation requires in order to maintain its form.

Secondly, the installation spaces that encourage prolonged interaction by causing viewers to flow in-and-out of the works mimics Salcedo’s continual care. This engaged interaction with the sculptural works relates to the strong immediate presences of each installation. The surfaces of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* illustrate Salcedo’s care for the pieces, enticing viewers into a close relationship with the works in order to

⁹⁵ Doris Salcedo, *The Making of “A Flor de Piel”* (White Cube Gallery Video), 2012.

examine their details.⁹⁶ This attentiveness relates to German philosopher and culture critic, Walter Benjamin's notion of aura. Benjamin defined aura as a "a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."⁹⁷ In his essay entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues that aura withers in the age of mechanical reproduction. Particularly commenting upon photography and film, he states that this technology replaces a unique existence with a multiple existence—a sense of "sameness" stripped from the sphere of tradition.⁹⁸ Therefore, the aura of an artwork is tied to authenticity, uniqueness, and a sense of authority.

Furthermore, Benjamin connects aura with ritual. He explains that the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious—and that the artwork's auratic mode is never entirely severed from ritual.⁹⁹ It is only technological reproducibility that "emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual."¹⁰⁰ *A Flor de Piel* and *Plegaria Muda* display a juxtaposition of the handmade and mass repetition. Similarly shaped tables repeat throughout the gallery and hundreds of rose petals are sewn together. However, ultimately, handmade uniqueness dominates the suggestions of mass production. For example, organic soil and varying grass blades peak through the surfaces of individually weathered tables in *Plegaria Muda*. In *A Flor de Piel*, Salcedo ensures an erasure of pattern with her insistence on handmade suturing and the avoidance of patterns in her petal placements. As the paradoxical qualities inherent to

⁹⁶ Bal, *Of What one Cannot Speak*, 134.

⁹⁷ Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 518.

⁹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflection*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), n.p.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

the works suggests, it is as if Salcedo reinstates the presence of aura among the mass produced, which symbolically represents mass death: a visual representation of interjecting individuality and presence back into tragedies marked by forgotten victims.

This sense of aura, as Benjamin suggests, creates a distance between an artwork and the viewer that results in an intersubjective experience as the viewer gazes at the art object. The aura of *A Flor de Piel* and *Plegaria Muda* strongly affects the viewer's relationship with the works. It is primarily this aura that encourages a process of "slow-looking" that scholars so often connect to a selection of Salcedo's works. Huyssen described the process of slow looking in relation to Salcedo's *Unland*, which he placed within a larger phenomenon of the emergence of memory sculpture.¹⁰¹ In an age dominated by technology, mass media, and globalization, Huyssen argues that society is experiencing a problematic restructuring of the sense of space and time.¹⁰² Therefore, embracing memory points towards an attempt to slow down, to recover a mode of contemplation.¹⁰³ He argues that artists will often promote a slow reading of their works through the suggestiveness of markings—a tactic Salcedo employs in her works.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* encourage a process of slow looking more so than Salcedo's earlier works due to their strong aura and Salcedo's attention to detail, resulting in the viewer's prolonged contemplation. From a distance, the works appear unremarkable, but a closer inspection slowly reveals the complexities of their surfaces—an insistence upon the viewer offering their extended time to the works.

Brinson indirectly comments upon slow looking in *A Flor de Piel* stating, "The

¹⁰¹ Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 90.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰³ Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

painstaking labor required to construct such an object inspires wonder, as an act of fairytale logic and devotional beauty. . . . Gradually however, these seductive valences are overtaken by more unsettling undertones.”¹⁰⁵ With respect to slow-looking and *Plegaria Muda*, the layer of soil is nearly invisible from a distance as it blends with the dark wood, and only upon a closer inspection does the viewer realize that the soil is real and that each table has its own organic personality.

Religious References

The contemplative nature of the slow-looking process recalls the silent, devout attention given to religious objects. Salcedo’s incorporation of religious references sets the tone of the works, further cuing the viewer to treat them as revered objects. Salcedo attests to the importance of the gaze in *A Flor de Piel*, stating, “Not quite an object, it stands removed from the world of objects and in a way, what defines this piece is our gaze, our relationship with it.”¹⁰⁶ The gaze evokes the act of staring at a sacred relic that projects a similarly powerful aura, which is enhanced by the installation of *A Flor de Piel*, which forces the audience to approach the work from a narrow hallway as if processing down the nave to a church, seduced by the adornment of the altarpiece. *A Flor de Piel* evokes a miraculous sacred object, as Salcedo herself references its miraculous creation. Because *A Flor de Piel* represents a symbolic funerary offering to the nurse, the viewer approaching the piece in an “altar-like” installation space perhaps mimics the visiting of a burial site—similar to the process of continually placing fresh roses on a tomb. The roses that remain in a suspended living state reiterate this notion, constantly paying tribute through their continual presence. Additionally, the veins within rose petals

¹⁰⁵ Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 211.

¹⁰⁶ Basualdo, Huyssen, and Princenthal, *Doris Salcedo*, 216.

and their blood red color suggest the Eucharist, a connection Brinson makes due to the wafer-like rose petals symbolically transmuted to flesh.¹⁰⁷

The contemplative duration that takes place in *Plegaria Muda* equally relates to ritual. The encouragement of “slow-looking” due to the miniscule details encourages the viewer to stop at each pair of tables in order to examine the delicacy of the grass, the crumbling soil, and weathered table legs. Due to this combination of walking and pausing, experiencing *Plegaria Muda* suggests the ritualistic practice of pausing at prayer stations.¹⁰⁸ The repetition of the tables and call to pause at each pair suggests ritual characterized by a sequence of repetitive acts. The name *Plegaria Muda*, meaning “silent prayer” further attests to this connection. As viewers wind through the installations, they symbolically pay their respects to each “coffin.” As Salcedo notes, “Despite not being marked, each piece is sealed and has an individual character, as if to indicate a funeral that has taken place.”¹⁰⁹ The catalogue essay discussing Salcedo’s most recent installation of *Plegaria Muda* reiterates its association with rituals of mourning: “...the earth interred in them...suggests the soil displaced from a freshly dug grave. Walking among the tables creates the impression of being in the midst of a cemetery, a place of mourning, memory, and reflection.”¹¹⁰

Although Salcedo does not outwardly discuss her religious affiliation, Colombia is rooted in Catholicism. Both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* reflect significant traditions of the Catholic faith due to their emphasis on prayer, relics, and their

¹⁰⁷ Brinson, “The Muted Drum,” p.212.

¹⁰⁸ Moacir dos Anjos, Mieke Bal, Isabel Carlos, Magnus Jensner, and Doris Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda* (Munich: Prestel, 2011), n.p.

¹⁰⁹ Grynstejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 211.

¹¹⁰ Nasher Sculpture Center, *Doris Salcedo: Inaugural Nasher Prize Laureate* (Dallas: Ussery Printing Company, 2016), n.p.

challenging processes of creation often compared to a miraculous act of faith. The exhausting efforts of the artist and her deep submersion into the context of each work reflect sacrifice or devotion so prevalent in the Catholic faith. Additionally, the connotations of a shroud and the use of roses in *A Flor de Piel* particularly coincide with Catholic beliefs. Although roses have historically been associated with religion, particularly the Virgin Mary, *A Flor de Piel* recalls the notion of a “miracle of the roses.” In a Latin American context, the most famous Mary apparition story involves a Mexican native who gathered roses in a cloak that eventually revealed an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as proof of the Virgin’s appearance (fig. 34).¹¹¹ Therefore, in addition to associations with the Eucharist, *A Flor de Piel* perhaps refers to a “miracle of roses,” further enhancing its connection to religious rituals. Lastly, saint Rose of Lima, the patron saint of Peru, was the first individual born in the Western Hemisphere to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church; her frequent association with roses additionally cause the flower to evoke a particularly Latin American Catholicism.

By encouraging “slow-looking” and referencing ritual, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* are presented as sacred objects. Salcedo’s impossible, arduous process of creation reinforces the intended sacred quality of the works. Brinson alludes to this, stating that Salcedo “frequently describes her projects, with their prolonged gestations and laborious techniques, as acts of faith, her creative process as a solitary liturgy.”¹¹² Salcedo herself claims that the successful completion of her works is an act of faith.¹¹³

The Power of Ritual: Healing and Regeneration

¹¹² Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 212.

¹¹³ Tim Marlow and Doris Salcedo, *On a “Flor de Piel” and “Plegaria Muda”* (White Cube Gallery), 2012.

Historically, ritual has provided a method of healing or coping, believed to transform the participants involved. Part of this transformation relates to the notion of liminality often associated with ritual. Coined by the folklorist Arnold van Gennep, the term was taken up by the anthropologist Victor Turner to indicate a mode of consciousness “betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states.”¹¹⁴ Duncan discusses how liminality describes the type of attention we bring to art museums. Similar to the ways in which folk rituals suspend the rules of normal social behavior, art museums provide spaces to achieve this liminal experience in which individuals remove themselves from everyday social relations, attaining new larger perspectives.¹¹⁵

Similar to the universality of the language of the body or the embodied experience, this notion of liminality has the ability to affect all viewers; it fails to distinguish between secular or sacred, political differences, social status, etc.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the language of ritual and the liminal experience with these installation further contributes to a personal, empathetic reaction towards *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*. Although all art museums encourage a liminal experience, the display of revered objects that encourage a contemplative “slow-looking” heighten the likelihood of viewer’s entering a liminal mode. A liminal response dissolves the boundaries that distinguish viewers from one another within the installation space, and simultaneously, the divisions between the viewer and the “other”—the marginalized victim. Therefore, the codified language of ritual creates the sense of a personal connection with the presented themes despite the viewer’s unfamiliarity with themes of political violence.

¹¹⁴ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 13.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Additionally, I argue that the indications of ritual and its associations with coping, along with the inclusion of visuals that recall healing, point towards Salcedo's suggestion that the viewer's empathetic interaction with the works emulates a process similar to grieving—a method of catharsis in order to cope with trauma. This relates to the frequent association of healing with ritual-like acts. Kertzer states that ritual is “an analytic category that helps us deal with the chaos of human experience and put it into a coherent framework.”¹¹⁷ According to Lincoln, ritual acts can alleviate inequalities stemming from political struggles.¹¹⁸ The visual elements of the works address the idea of a ritual's ability to heal. For the first time in her career, Salcedo incorporates living organic material into her work, suggesting a notion of regeneration. Although fragile, both the grass and rose petals remain living as long as they are properly cared for. The grass grows despite its entrapment within dense wood, alluding to the possibility of rebirth metaphorically stemming from the victim's body, and rose petals remain indefinitely alive, despite being pierced by needles. Salcedo's insistence upon a harsh juxtaposition between the organic versus the inorganic, and fragile pliability versus dense, resilient materials, alludes to the precariousness of violence. However, by directing the viewer's attention primarily to the organic inclusions, the works suggest that ultimately life can prevail despite violence. This is particularly the case in *Plegaria Muda* in which bright green blades of grass contrast starkly against the tables' dark wood. Additionally, in *A Flor de Piel*, the particular stitch Salcedo employs is typically used when sewing up wounds—a restoration of the “wholeness” of the victim's dismembered body. While Salcedo's early works often signal a violated body through harshly juxtaposed elements,

¹¹⁷ Adan, “Matter, Presence, Image,” 11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Plegaria Muda and *A Flor de Piel* indicate an overall sense of solidity. Brinson signals this shift stating, “Whereas earlier works by Salcedo suggest the spectral return of the murdered body in traces of clothing, bone, and hair... *Plegaria Muda* communicates a sense of the body safely interred.”¹¹⁹

Artists often incorporate ritual into their works as a means of coping with political violence. This is the case in Teresa Margolles’ exhibition addressing drug trafficking, *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* (What Else Could We Talk About?). It featured a daily performance for a six-month duration in 2009, during which the floors the Mexican Pavilion at the 53rd Venice biennale were methodically mopped by volunteers with water that contained traces of blood and dirt from the streets of Juarez (fig. 35).¹²⁰ Similar to the themes of Salcedo’s works, this installation was Margolles’ response to the news that in 2008, over 5,000 victims were murdered in Mexico. Preparation for took place months before the opening date; the artist herself continually collected material directly from the streets in a ritual-like process. She then displayed a ritual-like cleansing in order to achieve a form of catharsis by having individuals mop the gathered blood. Salcedo’s installations work in a similar fashion. However, in the case of *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*, the average museum visitor replaces the volunteers engaged in ritual-like interactions that evoke the rituals of mourning.

¹¹⁹ Grynsztejn and Widholm, *Doris Salcedo*, 210.

¹²⁰ Jamie L. Ratliff, “Visualizing Female Agency: Space and Gender in Contemporary Women’s Art in Mexico” (PhD diss., University of Louisville, 2001), 217.

CONCLUSION

Upon entering Salcedo's retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim, most viewers likely considered themselves far removed from the tragic effects of political violence. However, Salcedo's later installations persuade the viewer to personally engage with often-overlooked tragedies. Rather than enforcing a particular message by evoking mimetic representations of violence, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* incite an empathetic reaction according to the viewer's own personal experience with the installations. The works achieve this by encouraging an embodied response, the emphasis on the viewer's presence through the use of installation space, and the incorporation of ritual. Due to the viewer's empathetic interactions, the language of ritual, and the suggestions of healing, the viewer's experience simulates the cathartic effect of mourning.

Salcedo frequently emphasizes that without mourning the deceased, we would be machines—that the essence of the human is to commemorate. In reference to political violence, she states, "Each absence demands that we take responsibility for those who have been forcibly made absent...our relation with them lives on as grief."¹²¹ These recent works suggest Salcedo's insistence that society maintains a responsibility to confront inhumane acts as a means of retaining the empathetic qualities that make us human. While discussing *Plegaria Muda* as a site of memorial, Salcedo confirms this notion, stating that memorials *ritualize* the act of remembering our dead and

¹²¹ Doris Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda* (White Cube Gallery Video, 2011).

simultaneously emphasize the fragility of our own lives.¹²² The viewer's personal response temporarily interjects empathy back into sites marked by a lack of empathy. In an interview discussing *Plegaria Muda*, Salcedo summarizes the powerful potential of both works:

By individualizing traumatic experience through repetition, I hope that this work can evoke each death and restore its true dimension, thus allowing these profaned lives to be returned to the sphere of the human. I hope that in spite of everything, life might prevail, even in difficult conditions.¹²³

Salcedo's earliest works presented the tragic consequences of violence. As she continues to witness universal tragedies, Salcedo increasingly aims to *commemorate* victims through the interaction of both the artist and the viewer. Such is the case with both *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel*. Just as Salcedo hopes, life prevails in both works, signaling the ability to persevere despite suffering.

¹²² Doris Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Plegaria Muda* (White Cube Gallery Video, 2011).

¹²³ *Ibid.*

FIGURES



Figure 1

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10

Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass

Installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015

Reproduced from <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/6179/2>



Figure 2

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail), 2008–10

Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass

Photo by author



Figure 3

Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel*, installation view, 2015

Rose petals and thread

Installation view, Guggenheim Museum 2015

Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum, New York

Reproduced from <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/6179/2>.



Figure 4

Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel* (detail)

Rose petals and thread

Installation view, White Cube, London, 2012

Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photo: Ben Westoby

Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/a_flor_de_piel/images/a_flor_de_piel_3.html



Figure 5
Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1990 (1990)
Installation view, Doris Salcedo Studio, Bogotá, 2013
Photo: Oscar Monsalve Pino



Figure 6
Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (detail), 1992/2004
Shoes, drywall, paint, wood, animal fiber, and surgical thread, dimensions variable
Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/atrabiliarios/images/atrabiliarios_5.html



Figure 7
Doris Salcedo, *Untitled* furniture works, 1989-1995
Wood, concrete, fabric
Installation view, The Guggenheim Museum, 2015
Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum, New York
Reproduced from <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/6179/2>



Figure 8

Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1998

Wooden cabinet with glass, concrete, steel, and clothing

Collection of Lisa and John Miller. Photo: David Heald

Reproduced from: http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/images/untitled-concrete_10.html



Figure 9

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10

Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass

Installation view, Museo nazionale delle arte delle XXI secolo (MAXXI), Rome March 15 – June 24, 2012. Courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas

Reproduced from

<http://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/exhibitions/exhibition?id=326>



Figure 10
Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail), 2008-10
Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass
Installation view, CAM–Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 2011
Inhotim Collection, Brazil. Photo: Patrizia Tocci
Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/plegaria_muda/



Figure 11
Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail), 2008-10
Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass
Installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015
Photo by author

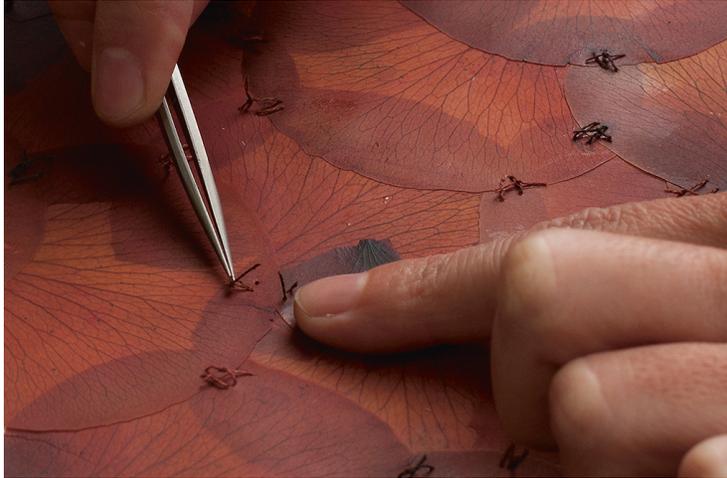


Figure 12

Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel* (test fragment), 2011–12

Photo: Ingrid Raymond

Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/a_flor_de_piel/images/a_flor_de_piel_4.html



Figure 13

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (detail of scale), 2008-10

Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass

Installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015

Photo by author



Figure 14
 Doris Salcedo, *Unland*, 1995–98
 Installation view, SITE Santa Fe, 1998–99
 Photo: Herbert Lotz
 Reproduced from: http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_6.html



Figure 15
 Examples from process of sewing *A Flor de Piel*.
 Stills from video featuring Doris Salcedo discussing the making of *A Flor de Piel*
 Courtesy of White Cube Gallery, 2012.
http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_studio/doris_salcedo_in_the_studio_2012/



Figure 16

Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda III*, 1994.

Wooden doors, wooden bed frame, and clothing

Private collection

Reproduced from

http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/la_casa_viuda/images/la_casa_viuda_8.html



Figure 17

Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather*, 1993-1994

Chocolate and soap

Courtesy of Carla Emil, Rich Silverstein, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Photo: Ben Blackwell

Reproduced from <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2007.97.A-B#full-caption>



Figure 18
Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10
Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass
Installation View, Nasher Sculpture Center, 2016
Photo by author



Figure 19
Special lighting to encourage grass of *Plegaria Muda* to grow
Ceiling of *Plegaria Muda* installation, Guggenheim, New York, 2015
Photo by author



Figure 20

Doris Salcedo, *Untitled* (1989-90)

Steel bed frames, plaster, cotton shirts, and animal fiber

Two parts, each: $71\frac{7}{8} \times 35\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ in. ($182.6 \times 89.5 \times 14$ cm)

Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Reproduced from <http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-shirts/>



Figure 21

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10

Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass

Installation view, Guggenheim Museum, 2015

Photo by author



Figure 22
Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10
Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass
Installation view, CAM, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 2011-2012
Reproduced from
<http://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/exhibitions/exhibition?id=326>



Figure 23
Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, August 27, 1999
Roses, Site-specific work, Bogotá, 1999
Photo courtesy of *El Espectador*, Bogotá
Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-roses/images/untitled-roses_4.html



Figure 24
Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, August 13, 2000
Roses, Site-specific work, Bogotá, 2000
Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-roses/images/untitled-roses_4.html

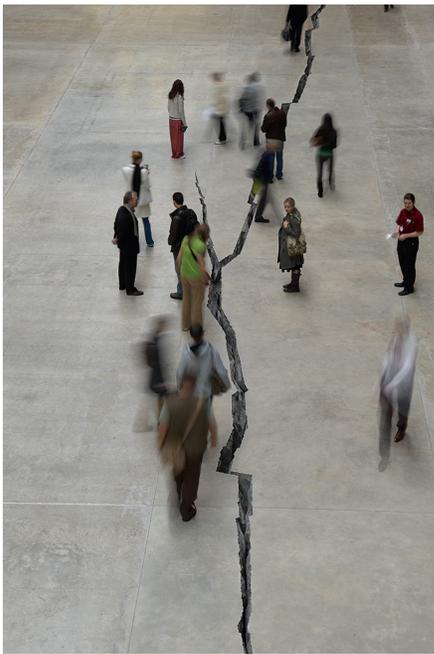


Figure 25
Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth* (detail), 2007
Concrete and steel, Length: 548 ft. (167 m)
Installation view, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2007
Photo: Stephen White
Reproduced from http://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/shibboleth/images/shibboleth_1.html

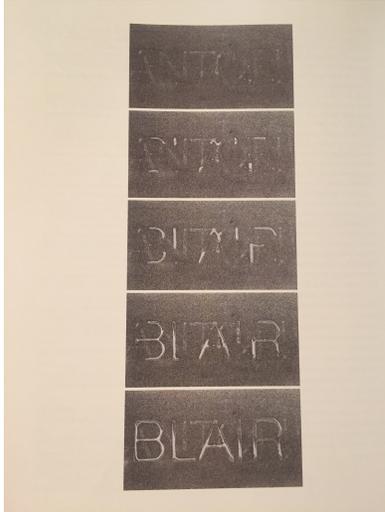


Figure 26
Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsest*, 2013-Present
Concrete, paint, and water
Photo by author



Figure 27
Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997
Performance with three-channel video installation; 4 days, 6 hours
XLVII Venice Biennale
Photos: Michael Stefanowski & Attilio Maranzano
Courtesy the Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
Reproduced from <http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/marina-abramovic/balkan-baroque-1997>



Figure 28

Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1986

Steel shelving, steel cot, plastic dolls, rubber, wax, and animal fiber

73½ × 94⅞ × 18⅞ in. (187 × 241 × 46 cm)

Courtesy of Tate Modern, London. Photo: Orcutt & Van Der Putten

Reproduced from <http://www3.meachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-hospital-furniture/>.



Figure 29

Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, 2002

280 wooden chairs and rope

Site-specific work, Palace of Justice, Bogotá, 2002 (Nov 7, 4 pm)

Photo: Sergio Clavijo

Reproduced from http://www3.meachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/noviembre_6_y_7/



Figure 30

Examples of extensive, scientific research involved before creating *A Flor de Piel*. Stills from video featuring Doris Salcedo discussing the making of *A Flor de Piel*. Courtesy of White Cube Gallery, 2012.

http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_studio/doris_salcedo_in_the_studio_2012/



Figure 31

Examples of individual treatment of each rose petal (*A Flor de Piel*).

Stills from video featuring Doris Salcedo discussing the making of *A Flor de Piel*. Courtesy of White Cube Gallery, 2012.

http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_studio/doris_salcedo_in_the_studio_2012/



Figure 32

Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–10

Wood, mineral compound, metal, and grass

Courtesy of CAM, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon 2011-2012

Reproduced from

<http://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/exhibitions/exhibition?id=326>



Figure 33

Salcedo’s crew of assistants sewing together “ritualistically”

Stills from video featuring Doris Salcedo discussing the making of *A Flor de Piel*

Courtesy of White Cube Gallery, 2012.

http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_studio/doris_salcedo_in_the_studio_2012/



Figure 34
 Virgin of Guadalupe with Apparitions, 1656.
 Oil on canvas 210 x 295 cm.
 Convent of the Conceptionists, Agreda, Soria, Spain



Figure 35
 Teresa Margolles, *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*, 2009
 Performance during the 53 Bienale di Venezia, Mexican Pavilion
 Photo courtesy of the artist.
 Reproduced from <http://www.peterkilchmann.com/artists/overview/++/name/teresa-margolles/id/17/media/margolles09k.jpg/>

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ABSTRACT

Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (b.1958) has investigated her country's history of political violence for over twenty years. Although her works remain rooted in her country's political landscape, the artist has progressively embraced more universal themes, replacing mere representations of violence with works that serve as powerful tools for coping with such violence. Salcedo's 2015 retrospective at the Guggenheim highlighted this shift in her oeuvre. Her later installations increasingly exhibited the meticulous handmade, interactive qualities, and organic material connoting healing. *Plegaria Muda* (2011) and *A Flor de Piel* (2014) epitomized this shift and have guided my thesis.

I show that rather than imposing an enforced message, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* more generally incite a personal, engaged interaction with the viewer in order to evoke a feeling of empathy. The works achieve this in three ways: encouraging an embodied response that emphasizes the human form, the activation of the gallery space through the use of installation, and the inclusion of ritualistic language. By encouraging a personal, involved experience, *Plegaria Muda* and *A Flor de Piel* ultimately simulate a process similar to mourning. These latest installations, with their increased engagement with the viewer and connotations of ritual and healing, signal Salcedo's aim to elicit a sense of empathy within the viewer towards incessant suffering that often remains ignored. This empathy is crucial for persevering despite violence.