

# North Dakota Museum of Art

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Grand Forks, ND – The North Dakota Museum of Art opens *Artists and War II* on Sunday afternoon, February 15, featuring the work of artists from Colombia, Peru and the United States. The exhibition continues through April 11.

In February 2008, the Museum unveiled the first installment of this three-part exhibition series in which artists respond to war as it affects ordinary, non-military people. *Artists and War I*, was a multi-media group exhibition of six artists from around the world creating art about war or conflict. Artists included Daniel Heyman, David Opdyke, Adrienne Noelle Werge, Siah Armajani, Hanna Hannah, and Miguel Angel Rojas. Only Opdyke chose to respond to larger political issues. His installation of 2,500 paper airplanes folded from the pages of an Arab/English dictionary suggested the underlying role of oil in America's decision to invade Iraq.

*Artists and War II* includes the work of Juan Manuel Echavarría of Bogotá, Colombia. Echavarría was first introduced in North Dakota with *The Disappeared* exhibition in 2005, and then again in his solo exhibition *Bocas de Ceniza/Mouths of Ash* in 2006. Both exhibitions were originated by the North Dakota Museum of Art.

Echavarría's newest work, *Death and the River*, is comprised of over 100 lenticular photographs of burial vaults, each individually decorated with the letters NN (NO NAME). During the massacres endemic to Colombia's drug war, the bodies of disappeared and mutilated victims are tossed in the river, food for vultures, untraceable. In the region of Puerto Berrio, however, the decomposed corps is rescued from the Magdalena River and placed in a tomb. It is then that the common people of Puerto Berrio start a unique ritual of appropriation. An N N can be chosen and asked for favors, business like favors such as "Please help me win the lottery and I will take care of your tomb." The person, blessed by the favor, enthusiastically adopts the NN and places flowers, a glass of water, or possibly a marble slate inscribed with "thank you NN for the favor received." Other NNs are given hand written names, sometimes the names of their newly adopted "family."

Echavarría chose to print the photographs as lenticulars in order to suggest the changing usage of each burial vault. The lenticular lens is an array of magnifying lenses, designed so that when viewed from slightly different angles, different images are magnified. Therefore each print holds multiple images, or at least two tombs, which appear and disappear as the image is viewed from different angles.

Johanna Calle, also Colombian, came to Grand Forks to install *Black Opus (Obra Negra)* and to speak at the opening. This body of work sprang from the artist's numerous tours through the slums that encircle Bogotá. As a consequence of the violence and societal breakdown caused by endless civil war, young girls play seminal role in these marginalized neighborhoods. Mostly absent war widows or single mothers head most households, women forced to work long hours outside their homes. Subsequently, girls as young as eight years old bear the burdens of raising the children and maintaining the families. Their educations are curtailed; it isn't long before they themselves become pregnant.

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The slum's unstable, make-shift houses are constructed of cardboard, scrap wood, and corrugated metal and amassed over two or three generations. They perch precariously on the mountains surrounding Bogota. Each is held together by the young girl, represented in Calle's wire drawings by just their legs and the feet.

According to Curator Laurel Reuter, "Johanna Calle has created a series of charming drawings of wire stitched onto mat board instead of the more usual pen or pencil on paper. With spare gestures, she suggests the tumbling houses of the slums of Bogota, overflowing with the displaced and disposed of a civil war that began over fifty years ago. Each house rests upon the body of a girl child. These splendid drawings harbor a kernel of ugliness that exists at the core of all great beauty."

The third Colombian in the exhibition is video artist Fernando Grisalez Blanco. His video also deals with the dehumanizing effects of war upon "everyman." In the rundown center of Bogota, a man who is just a man spends most of his days repeatedly chasing homeless people from his stoop, convinced they are military rats, worthless humans, the dregs of war.

Guillermo Guardia (Memo), a Peruvian artist now living in Grand Forks, created new work for the exhibition. He says, "I started sculpting my Baby Devil series about five years ago. I was primarily interested in exploring the good and evil found in everyone, especially at the beginning of the war in Iraq. First, I made baby devils with weapons such rifles, bazookas, pistols, and knives. Often the clay figures were painted wearing camouflage."

"For the show *Artists and War*, I looked to my home country. As a Peruvian, I lived through our civil war during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. These Baby Devils depict the consequence of war for its real victims: civilians. A couple are missing arms and legs, sacrificed to explosives. A female Baby Devil looks sadly at her growing belly, the result of rape. Another's wrists and ankles are tied while undergoing torture. The other two Baby Devils in the series represent perpetrators rather than victims. A commando soldier is overloaded with weapons. A politician with his large Pinocchio nose, makes a speech, while hiding money behind his back."

Guardia continues, "As I was finishing the series it came to my mind that this mayhem was and is not restricted to Peru. Death, mutilations, torture, corruption, and extreme violence can be witnessed in Peru, Venezuela, Mexico, Africa, or even in USA and countries in Europe."

As part of the *Artists and War* series, the Museum is bringing back *Snow Country Prison: Interned in North Dakota*, an exhibition organized by the Museum that has been touring throughout North Dakota since 2004. The exhibition is the story not of prisoners of war but of civilian Germans and Japanese, many of whom were U. S. citizens. In 1941 the U. S. Justice Department converted Fort Lincoln from a surplus military post into an internment camp to detain people arrested in the United States as enemy aliens. Over its five-year operation as a camp, the Bismarck facility housed about 1,500 men of German nationality, and over 1,800 of Japanese ancestry. The first group of Japanese and German men were arrested by the FBI in the days immediately after Pearl Harbor. The arrests were done under the authority of the Alien Enemies Act, and these so-called "enemy aliens" were removed from their homes, primarily on the West Coast and East Coast, and sent to camps in isolated parts of the country.

The "art" in this exhibition of official government photographs is the haiku written by Itaru Ina, a Japanese American from San Francisco who spent eighteen months in Fort Lincoln. According to Reuter, "in these short, three line poems, twenty-eight year old Ina captured our place so accurately,

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we find ourselves believing everything else he tells us. “In the snowy spring—a vagabond devastated by the war.” Or, “Willow leaves alongside it, the Missouri River is deep, on its own.”

He writes of learning to live in proximity to German internees: “Enjoyed the music—the foreign smell of white men no longer there.” Or, “Cosmos flowers—a disheartened German plays the piano.”

The exhibition title came from Ina’s haiku “The war has ended—but I’m still in the snow country prison.” Ironically, it was North Dakota’s Senator William Langer who forced the final closing of the internment camps two years after the war had ended. “Chilly winter light swallows the man to bring back the darkness.”

In 2010, the Museum will organize *Artists and War III*. The series will culminate with a book and a national tour consisting of a selection of work from this three-part series.

The North Dakota Museum of Art is open 9 – 5 pm weekdays and 1 – 5 weekends. There is no admission fee.