

The Exhibition as Record: Moe Penders' *Volver* & Reconciliation

By Reyes Ramirez

Space HL, featuring Moe Penders' exhibition *Volver*, is across the street from a supermarket, flanked to its right by a tattoo parlor and an auto repair shop to its left. Before, the space was a bicycle shop, and before that, a bar called El Miramar. Everything in Houston, Texas is in flux. Each building contains a world that could end and begin within two years. The same could be said of people: moving place to place, building a home until they can't grow peacefully anymore. Often, this migration is not by choice, and they are punished for it anyways by being killed, having their children removed from them.

I met Penders, Salvadoran photographer and curator, a few years back. I've written about their work before because they often explore Salvadoran identity and culture through photography, which fills in much of what I missed. There was a cost to my Salvadoran father's migratory journey— my direct connection to his homeland. For me, Penders' work makes my phantom limb real. El Salvador, something I am of, but not from, becomes accessible through images, and Penders' latest exhibition, *Volver*, expands this exploration of connection to home.

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Moe, in a Salvadoran context, is displaced from their history as well. *Volver* is an exhibition “developed from the death of [their] father in 1993, after the Salvadoran Civil

War [where the state was backed by the United States].” Penders, throughout their life, heard different accounts as to how he died. When Penders asked the embassy for official records, they were told that the government investigated but none exist. This state-endorsed shrug at their inquiry into history is a form of displacement since it creates a gap in a family’s memory that echoes throughout generations. Perhaps this is by design since forcing others to deal with the consequences of colonialist actions is much easier than being held accountable for them. We, lost in this, are left to reconcile with whatever’s left.

I know this feeling. My father, as a child soldier, was a victim of the Salvadoran Civil War too. Though he escaped to the United States, trauma took root. He turned to alcoholism to cope. In the small moments I spoke to him he recounted his experiences in this calm voice, as though reciting the plot to a boring movie. I don’t really know how to ask about our history without reopening these traumas. I don’t know if I want more answers from him about any of this. It’s taken me a minute to reconcile how to love my heritage and its unresolved horrors, especially since the effects are still too real. Moe’s and my experiences are not the same by any means, but it’s part of the same oppressive project. History can be so elusive that its lacking creates a vacuum vast enough so that no amount of answers, however big or little, can fill it. The pieces we have must be put together somehow. I don’t know what really happened to my father. Neither does Moe. Thus, I write, and Penders photographs.

There's a coziness to SpaceHL when you first walk in: white walls, clean tile floor, the exposed ceiling revealing beams of brown wood. The space is about 1,000 sq. ft., so you can breathe everything in at once. Penders' pieces rest on the walls like windows into memories.

A hand-painted sign from Moe's father's former auto shop in El Salvador reflects a typical form of advertisement in Central American communities. These can be seen all over Houston's diasporic neighborhoods: on food trucks selling tacos or pupusas; on bars; on community centers outlining education programs; and more. Moe told me that to recreate this advertisement, they projected the original image onto the wall, traced and painted it. This is a way to recreate history, to keep something from another life new. This creative mode of presenting information also reveals how underserved communities can connect through public art. The same could be said of memories and culture, that to revisit something in a new context allows for its revitalization or reinterpretation. In Moe's exhibition, this sign serves as an entry point to a memory of hope and stability through an auto shop advertisement, a declaration of the ability to repair what is broken.

Further down the same wall is a framed photo with blurred high grass doused in a car's red light in the right foreground as darkness fills out the rest of the image. Another interpretation of a memory, Moe told me this is a photo, titled *CA-4 / Curva de la muerte*, of where their father disappeared. They took this photograph on a recent trip to El Salvador as they drove by. This stretch of road is known for its perils, locally dubbed as Death's Curve. The blurry style mimics the dreamlike nature of memory but being bathed in red light creates unease that is encircled by the void of

history. This photograph also manifests familial storytelling into a tangible object, a way of documenting what the government attempted to erase.

Past the information desk on the next wall the brightest piece exists: a pair of headlights from a Volvo P1800, eponymously titled, and encased in a wooden frame that hangs nearly three feet from the floor. You can feel their brilliant heat. The surrounding walls have imprints from the bulb's emphatic glow, reminiscent of the shape of blown up molecular cells. The headlights paint the space in a crown-like blaze. It's a familiar sight... someone pulls up into your driveway in the dead of night, as if the sun's eyes directly meet yours. Looking into them hurts, much like how looking into certain memories hurt. Moe recounts how their father's Volvo would come into the driveway at night. In a metaphorical sense, this is Moe's father returning.

The next piece, *LumenLux* is a gelatin silver print made using the headlights of the Volvo exposed onto analog paper. It's large and depicts something abstract. The left side is bright and helix-like, and the middle is a darker shade of grey that spirals into a black cloud on the right side. It is a darker version of Cy Twombly's *Say Goodbye, Catullus...*, a formation of a thought, of a memory, of a history that is driven by tumult and war. It is gorgeous, because this is what many diasporic people do: make beauty out of this often-terrifying world.

This beauty-making is out of necessity as decolonizing the past and present allows generational growth beyond colonial intentions for oppressed peoples. Kency Cornejo, in her essay "Decolonial Futurisms: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art," explains: "Decolonizing the future, therefore,

entails a decolonization of the past and present, a temporal simultaneity that delinks from a Western rationality of time and space in the making of decolonial epistemologies and ontologies that can exist in a pluriverse. The problem of modern ontology is the assumption that there is only one universe (the Western universe.)”¹ Moe, through this exhibition, is creating an alternate timeline that subverts colonial intent: that the death of their father be erased from history. *LumenLux* even appears to be the metaphorical creation of an alternate timeline that is both diverging and converging with our reality. In a decolonizing sense, as much as one can see light transition in to darkness, the opposite can hold true as well, that is darkness unraveling in to light.

The final piece is a vertical quadriptych showing a DC3 plane, an aircraft given to the Salvadoran military by the United States, gliding along a blue sky. There is a childlike wonder present in the photographs, the camera documenting the plane’s entrance and exit from view, becoming a metaphor for the passage of time. The final photo in the set is the plane flying nearly out of frame but obscured by wire fencing. There’s a juxtaposition and deeper metaphor here: the freedom of the sky and of flight, ending in incarceration. The photo is also smudged with fingerprints that Moe believes belonged to their father, a literal documentation of having once existed. Que vida.

Moe’s exhibition is a living, breathing record. By extension, every exhibition is a record, and what is included, or excluded, that is a result of deliberate decisions made by design, either through art exhibitions, funding, and the critical thought surrounding

¹ Kency Cornejo, *Decolonial Futurisms: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art in Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*. Riverside: UCR ARTSblock. (2017): 20-31.

them, by publishers, academics, editors and/or curators. For example, research provided in the article “Diversity of artists in major U.S. museums”² shows “...the first large-scale study of artist diversity in museums provide[s] estimates of gender and ethnic diversity at each museum, and overall, we find that 85% of artists are white and 87% are men.” Houston shares this issue as well; in a recent NALAC report, figures as low as less than 1% of funding from the Houston Endowment, the Cullen Foundation, the Powell Foundation and the Albert & Margaret Alkek Foundation went to Latinx organizations despite Houston’s Latinx communities representing 44% of the population.³ In regards to critical thought surrounding the art of marginalized peoples, the *New York Times* opinion piece “The Dominance of the White Male Critic” by Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang noted the research of others: “The six most influential art critics in the country, as selected by their peers, are all white, the writer Mary Louise Schumacher found in a recent survey of more than 300 working visual arts critics. Almost all of them are men who have written for legacy publications for at least 20 years. That’s true of other genres, like film reviews, where there are 27 white male film critics for each woman of color, a study from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found.”⁴ This sort of omission of oppressed people’s art and critical thought is the beginning of their erasure from history; how can an oppressed people build off the past if it is constantly omitted and/or erased by governments and institutions? We make do,

² Accessed July 2019. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6426178/>

³ Accessed July 2019 <https://www.nalac.org/communications/newsroom/2595-study-reveals-funding-gaps-houston-latino-arts>

⁴ Accessed July 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/05/opinion/we-need-more-critics-of-color.html>

but damn if our progress wouldn't be so much easier if our peoples could prosper. Through Moe's and I's experience as diasporic artists, this omission and erasure applies to art and people.

In Moe's case, the erasure of investigatory documents becomes the impetus for this exhibition; thus, the art is the documentation, and the exhibition is a demand by the artist to be witnessed by an audience to see that history is not one objective timeline. This article is further documentation of Moe's work; together, we are creating an alternate timeline that combats the "Western rationality of time and space."

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I don't have any answers for my father's disappearance from my life. I don't think Moe has any either. Many others don't have any answers. I don't know if any of our questions will be answered, ever. This is a feature, not a flaw, of imperialism, empire, and colonialism, to have others bear the burden: it is not history, as it is happening right now. This sentiment is not exclusive to Salvadorans as many other people suffer from this issue: omission of our histories due to erasure.

All I know is that something must survive. I write. Moe photographs. Moe also pushes the capabilities of an exhibition, as a visual form of documentation composed of images, feelings and reconciliations. The exhibition becomes a document, a record, despite what nations wish to erase. Moe's *Volver* is a counter narrative to the prevailing modes of omission and erasure forced upon our lives as diasporic subjects in the United States. That is worth everything.

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