

Luis Camnitzer beguiles with major Chilean exhibition

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The German-Uruguayan artist has joint shows at MAC Quinta Normal and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights.

The first piece that greets visitors to Luis Camnitzer's expansive show at MAC Quinta Normal is titled "Migración." It is a model of a tree trunk lying in the gallery's main hall, its exposed roots facing the entrance as though it has just been dragged in from the nearby park. The bark, however, has been replaced by overlapping tiers of identical orange pencils that cover the circumference of the trunk in its entirety, stretching towards a large sheet of white paper where a sketch depicts branches reaching for some imaginary sun.



"The Perception of Oneself" on show currently at MAC Quinta Normal/Peter Schächli.

"Migración," with its playful questioning of art's protean status as both a product and a transformation of the natural world, encapsulates the elegance of Camnitzer's ideas that always have the refinement and charm of a well-executed punch line. Written high on the wall opposite the piece are the words: "The Museum is a school, the artist learns to communicate, the public learns to make connections," which declares a merging of creativity and education that returns again and again throughout the exhibition as it has done in Camnitzer's prodigious career.

Camnitzer moved to New York in 1964 after growing up in Uruguay, the country his family had fled to from Germany during the World War II. The

move to New York heralded the beginning of a career that has seen Camnitzer cultivate his ideas as a teacher, artist and writer — roles he refuses to separate, united as they are by a creative commitment to the nurturing of critical thought. His body of work, lovingly curated at MAC Quinta Normal, ranges from installations to prints and photography that owe as much to the anarchic escapades of the surrealists as it does to the cerebral modernism of Duchamp and Borges.

In "Portrait of the Artist" we find a pencil hanging by a piece of string being blown back and forth by an electric fan. As the pencil sways, it sketches an ongoing and indeterminate arc on the gallery wall, while "Coca-Cola Bottle filled with a Coca-Cola Bottle" is exactly what it sounds like: a glass bottle filled with the shards of its double. Out of all these conceptual pieces though, it is "Plusvalía" that is perhaps the most wryly anarchic as it presents a framed woolen glove alongside a typed letter explaining its dramatic rise in value after Camnitzer got other famous artists to wear it.

For all the droll absurdism that punctuates these works, a Camnitzer piece never drifts off into frivolity or solipsism. There is always a serious commitment to the questioning of art's capacity to facilitate a meaningful exchange in a world driven by market forces. "Plusvalía" could be received as an open invitation to cynicism if we weren't brought in on the joke. Its deadpan delivery renders art's hyperinflation as a cause for humor rather than despair. In Camnitzer's work, humor becomes a form of dissent that is as inclusive as it is subversive.

Subversion and dissent are constant themes in the exhibit. There is a series of boxes on show at the MAC Quinta Normal where we are given a line — that is also the piece's title — and an image or object in the space above it. In "The Perception of Oneself" we see a blank space in the frame and two eyeballs leering from its sides. In "The Form Generating The Content," the frame has collapsed in on itself, containing nothing but shattered glass. "In Pencil drawing done after L. Cranach's 'Pythagoras as discoverer of the musical intervals' and erased from the paper" we find nothing but a tiny bottle containing the rubbings out of the sketch.



His fragrance lingered on...

In these pieces, questions of agency, of form and of objectivity — the tropes customary to high-modernism — are executed with elegance and wit that strip conceptual art of the bloated posturing that has come to characterize it for the uninitiated. The interplay the boxes present between abstract ideas and the immediacy of language introduces us to an understanding of the artist as both an architect and escaper of the labyrinths that are the inherited edifices of modernism. Wit is crucial to Camnitzer's work, in an aesthetic and an ethical sense, as it is what allows him to draw the viewer into playing an active role in the investigations his art presents.

One of the 35 photoetching that make up 'The Uruguayan Torture Series' on show at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights/Luis Camnitzer.

It is in the [Museum of Memory and Human Rights'](#) half of Camnitzer's exhibit, however, that the artist finds a platform for his most poignant and engrossing work. It is here that we are introduced to "The Uruguayan Torture Series" — 35 photo-etchings, each with a short phrase written beneath them, that evoke strange scenes of horror and sinister ambiguity. Some could be shadow-steeped polaroids taken in haste during the aftermath of a violent atrocity, while others only go so far as to suggest darker contexts. One simply presents us with a photograph of an empty glass bottle placed on a table with the words "the instrument was explained in detail."

"The Uruguayan Torture Series" is Camnitzer's most explicitly political work and it is also his most unsettling. The links between each piece — the nightmare narrative that lingers between them — is up to the viewer to weave. We are abandoned to the images and their implications. The references the works cast are no longer to the guarded world of art theory and academia, but to reality in its most visceral form — violence, specifically the kind inflicted upon Latin America during the dictatorships of the late twentieth century and Operation Condor.

The series is so startling though, not because the work is stripped of Camnitzer's characteristic humor, but because he draws us in with a far more nuanced form of manipulation — sincerity. Camnitzer allows the viewer to interact directly with the strange power of these images, uninhibited by political or ethical entreaties. The appeal to an understanding and condemnation of torture is made to our sensibility, not just our intellect. In this way Camnitzer allows the series to function as an unforgettable, and even harrowing, call to dissent against the forces of unchecked power.

Luis Camnitzer's work is on show at MAC Quinta Normal and The Museum of Memory and Human Rights until August 25.

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