

# EL CUERPO SUTIL

*"It is beginning to be seen on all sides that the physical, the biological and the psychological activities of man as a unitary reality are so intimately interblended, that no arbitrary selection of any one of these standpoints can provide a satisfactory solution of the nature of the concrete whole which human personality presents."*  
- G. R. S. Mead, *The Doctrine of the Subtle Body in Western Tradition* (1919)

In *El Cuerpo Sutil*, textile-like objects—things made insistently and patiently by hand, through processes of weaving, plaiting, slicing, mixing, wrapping, and layering—bear relationships to the burdens and absences of memory. Both artists, Miguel Ángel Rojas and John Sparagana, juxtapose mundane materials (magazines, twine, corn flour, banana leaves, a blanket) with the suggestion of more abstract, underlying conditions. To make something by hand is both a radical gesture and a mode of engaging meditatively with history, memory's socially constituted (and equally unreliable) twin. In their work, Rojas and Sparagana probe how we might make sense of the gaps that take place in our collective remembering: both propose a kind of empathy, something slightly unconscious, even physical. When you look at these works, imagine the touch, the texture, the feel of them.

In his *Crowds & Powder* series, Sparagana has hand-fatigued magazine pages and inkjet prints, spending hours handling each inch of the paper until it no longer feels like paper. The softened pages—broken down and bearing traces of oils from the artist's hands—are then sliced and mixed into a new, interdigitated surface. Every piece makes use of paint or oil stick—Sparagana considers the paint an intervention into the image, a painstaking interruption and disruption of the image field, an emptying out or a complication of the original form. Bobby and Jack Kennedy smile out of *Crowds & Powder: Kennedy Brothers 2*. We recognize them even as we see the distressed texture of the image itself. So embedded in American memory (especially here in Texas, 50 years after the president's assassination), the ghostly images of the Kennedy brothers trigger a chain of associations. What we see and how we respond is constituted by inherited things, buried memories, and submerged feelings about one of the major traumas of U.S. history. What we don't see as clearly is also complex. The white oil effaces a background field that has figures in it, including Ted, the Kennedy brother who survived the 1960s. Here, as in the series as a whole, the emotional resonance lies just past the legible contours of the thing itself.

*Sin frío permanente*, a rough-hewn blanket, woven and then silkscreened with *mambe* (dried and pulverized coca leaves), is patterned with a geometric design popular in Colombian textiles. The piece is part of the Rojas's *Sueños raspachines* series. The *raspachines* are poorly paid nomadic workers at the lowest rung of the cocaine industry in Colombia. They harvest the coca leaves, scraping them to produce the base material from which cocaine is derived. While they work, they dream, Rojas writes, of health, education, and land of their own—elusive goals in a brutal industry. The blanket, its title promising an eternal end to the cold, is folded on an unseen shelf and haunted by the suggestion of a body keeping warm beneath it, by unfulfilled dreams, and by unwritten history. There are bodies wrapped in this textile, even if they are not physically here.

*Por Pan*—an installation that includes a braided cord, a video of Rojas braiding a similar cord, and a bowl-shaped container of banana leaves filled with corn flour—offers an homage to invisible makers of the past and points to the tangled histories of class exploitation. Textiles like the braided cord have been used in Andean architecture for centuries. Buried under layers of plaster and other building materials, these cords provide a flexible and invisible support system for domestic architecture. Rojas writes, "*AGROSTIS PERENNANS* is the scientific name for a nearly-extinct grass, native to the Andean highlands. Braided together, this fiber served as the connective tissue, holding together the bamboo used to construct ceilings in La Colonia. Uncovered during the destruction of a Spanish colonial house 15 years ago, this woven grass existed for centuries under many layers of plaster." Here the artist meditates upon the people who made the rope, those who worked in return for base materials of subsistence—for bread—while their work supported the structures that housed more affluent community members. He paints the cord with silver in a gesture of remembrance and to honor those workers, recalling their touch on these same fibers.

MIGUEL ÁNGEL ROJAS is a conceptual and multimedia artist based in Bogotá. His work has been shown internationally, and is represented in the collections of the Tate Modern, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zürich, among others.

JOHN SPARAGANA is the Grace Christian Vietti Chair in Visual Arts, and Chair of the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts at Rice University. His work has been shown internationally, and is included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; and Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, among others.

This exhibition was made in collaboration with Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, IL.

Front cover image: Miguel Ángel Rojas, *Sin frío permanente*, 2012. Mambe and silver leaf on jute, 6.56 ft. x 9.84 ft.

Center spread image: John Sparagana, *Crowds & Powder: The Revolutionaries 2*, 2013. Archival inkjet prints with oil stick, sliced and mixed, on paper, 21 in. x 31 1/2 in.

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"No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me."

One of the most resounding scenes in Marcel Proust's epic novel *In Search of Lost Time* takes place over an afternoon tea. With his first bite of cake, the narrator is famously transported into a reverie about the past. That involuntary apparition of long forgotten memories, triggered by the sensory experience of the tea and *petites madeleines*, illustrates the intangible, trickster nature of memory and the strength of an impression—visceral, sensory, overwhelming, and unexpected. Involuntary associations triggered by the cake surprise the narrator and then slip away. By the third bite, his thoughts are muddled and unclear. Based in feeling rather than cognition, such fleeting impressions spark deeper reflections. Do you know the feeling? That flash of an instinct that something is familiar, followed immediately by the realization that you have forgotten what was so familiar about it?

In *Crowds & Powder: Cairo 1 and 2*, even though both works use the same image as their source material, what we recognize shifts under our feet. In *Cairo 2*, the *punctum* is, pointedly (for me), in the facial expression of the foremost figure, his lips twisted into something like a smile, even as he shields his head. Maybe an expression of adrenaline, of fear, of nervous excitement and laughter while he runs: what do we see, what do we know, what do we remember, and what do we feel? Reversed in *Cairo 1*, the central figure's face is more unreadable, his mouth and eyes shadowed into his face. A third figure, not seen in *Cairo 2*, appears to be standing just behind him, facing another direction. The color change also signals a different feeling; from the grayish black and white of *Cairo 2* to the punch of the red in *Cairo 1*, we might perceive cold and hot, subdued then enflamed, mediated and then described.

The whiteness of *Crowds & Powder: The Street* recalls the hazy, smoke-filled streets at an instant immediately after bombs were detonated in Boston. Around-the-clock news coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings refracted the glazed faces and tears of the terrified runners and their families as they scrambled amid the chaos. The figures seen here are vaguely familiar, but anonymous. We know them but we don't. We sense a fleeting recognition, an involuntary remembrance that mixes our own feelings about the event with its media representation. A *petite madeleine* of sorts is buried: a collective mourning, a lingering bad feeling we associate with these media images is massaged into something gentler, both nostalgic and beautiful. From the bloody scene, Sparagana recuperates something that resonates, something elegiac, something felt.

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One last thing: In 1996, musician and composer Arto Lindsay released an album titled *O Corpo Sutil*, which draws together bossa nova rhythms with enigmatic lyrics, electronic melodies, and sonic explorations. "It's equivalent to the nervous system," he notes, about the title. "There's the gross body, which is the physical body; there's the subtle body, which is the nervous system, and then there's the spiritual level. ... It implies lightness, grace." Lindsay spent his formative years in Brazil during the Tropicália movement, and he makes music between the genres of rock, pop, improvisation, and the avant-garde: "That against this; this against that; a blend, a juxtaposition, loud/soft. There's no particular point in putting these things together. The point is what comes out in the end."<sup>2</sup> There is incongruity here, a subtle harmony borne from the combination of seemingly disparate aspects of human life and thought. The result is a strangely moving synthesis, something touching, something visceral.

<sup>1</sup> David Krasnow, "Arto Lindsay," *BOMB* 71 / Spring 2000.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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