

Chelsea



KATE MORRELL:
...Y EL BARRO SE HIZO ETERNO
(*...AND THE MUD BECAME ETERNAL*)

15 DECEMBER 2021-4 FEBRUARY 2022

Continuing the gallery's connection with the archives and collections of individuals and institutions, **Chelsea Space** is pleased to host the solo presentation of the film, *...Y el barro se hizo eterno (...And the Mud Became Eternal)*, alongside related prints, artist's books and resources created and assembled by the artist Kate Morrell. Moving between documentation and translation, the eponymous film explores a series of private and public interiors populated by objects that, as directed by Morrell, draw us into an inter-generational dialogue around the contexts and conditions of national collections. Through the processes of excavation, both within and outside of the film, Morrell exposes and questions the relationship between informal and authorised frameworks of knowledge and value.

Produced in 2017 during a residency at FLORA ars + natura in Bogotá, Colombia, the film and associated research is reflective of Morrell's practice more broadly, as one that activates a process of archival investigation into materials that are often marginal, ephemeral and overlooked. Much of Morrell's work is made in response to a collection or archive, from the Jacquetta Hawkes Archive at the University of Bradford (*Pots Before Words*, 2014); Kendal Museum, Cumbria (*Lustre*, 2015) and Sitterwerk Art Library & Material Archive (*Residual Stacks*, 2018). With each project, connections are reproduced through the consequence of encounter — by the intervention of touch and display — where the often incidental gesture conveys our sometimes ambiguous relationships, custodial or otherwise, to objects and their own discrete histories.

‘...Y el barro se hizo eterno (...And the Mud Became Eternal)’

Synopsis

The term ‘guaquería’ - the act of looting archaeological sites - has been used in Colombia since the mid 19th century. Illicit excavations by gvaqueros serve the existence of many public museums and private collections in Bogotá.

Within the film, ‘...Y el barro se hizo eterno (...And the Mud Became Eternal)’, looting is posited as political resistance, working in opposition to nationalist, colonial and Western-oriented approaches to archaeology and museum collecting practices.

The film centres around conversations with four Bogotá women, documenting their private collections of pre-Columbian ceramics, displayed within domestic settings and embedded within the interior architecture of their homes. We hear them speak of shifting value systems, rights and protections; engaging with urgent debates around cultural restitution and repatriation.

The women address the divisive subject of government laws put into place by the Ministry of Culture c1990s–2000s, prohibiting the export and transfer of moveable assets of cultural interest and stating that private collections must be declared to the government. The complications and repercussions of these decrees are laid out and challenged; the women - identities withheld - articulate varied rationale for keeping commoditised objects (ceramics and gold) in circulation.

Through these conversations, alternative reasoning for gvaquería is proposed, challenging ways ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’ collecting practices are defined and highlighting colonial (mis)readings of such practices. The activities of gvaquería function outside of what is deemed ‘official’ archaeology, and this being inherently a European concept formed by colonial and nationalist values.

The collections of two Bogotá museums are brought into focus: MUSA Museo Arqueológico and Museo del Oro and their collections of pre-Columbian ceramics and gold (respectively). The museums were founded by two of Colombia’s largest financial institutions: Banco Popular and Banco de la República. The vast majority of these museum collections were acquired from gvaqueros, thus the activities of the gvaquería - at one time seen as a valid livelihood - serves the existence of the museum collections.

“In Colombia, gvaquería - largely seen as ‘unlawful’ excavation - came to coexist side by side with archaeology.”[1]

Conversations are held in Spanish and part-translated to English to agitate further translation tensions, retain the complexities and withhold new knowledge. The video incorporates museum archive footage from 1980s–90s and printed matter from the library and archive of MUSA Museo Arqueológico, along with newly shot video and photography, interlacing the public and private, blurring ‘expert’ knowledge with non-scientific and personal language, vivid biography, anecdote, and lived, undocumented experience. Additional research and archive fragments include screenshots from YouTube videos promoting sources for looted antiquities in Colombia (uploaded 2016–2019), scanned pages from the interior design publication ‘Casa Colombiana’ (Villegas Editores, 1998), and illustrations of company merchandise from Banco Popular Visual Identity Manual (Banco Popular, 1986).

Autobiographical aspects of collecting are highlighted, as the women describe emotional ties to objects and recall past events. Also present are the women’s daughters, who bring distinct generational voices and the conversations become a catalyst to readdress family inheritance agreements. Some of the women have played a role in the excavation and trade of their objects - purchasing directly from *guaqueros*; for others their collection is a family inheritance rather than a personal discovery. For another, the international trade and exhibition of ceramics and gold is their livelihood, having worked as an art consultant, gallerist and dealer since the 1970s.

The film was developed in 2017 during a ten-month British Council residency in Bogotá, Colombia. For this period I was based at FLORA ars + natura, within a residency community of majority Bogotá artists and international artists from Latin America and Europe. This project was not the result of a predetermined agenda in the form of a written residency proposal but rather something that evolved organically from within this unique context and relations. The project was informed through conversations with visiting curators, artists and crucially, their families. A visit to an artist-friend’s family home in early 2017 - where pre-Columbian ceramics were around the house - served as a catalyst for enquiry. The research expanded from the museums, archives and libraries in downtown Bogotá to domestic spaces in the affluent (upper ‘estrato’) neighbourhoods in the north of the city - where I was a guest in their homes for an afternoon.

‘...Y el barro se hizo eterno’ engages with urgent debates about cultural restitution and repatriation through calling attention to these commoditised ceramic objects in circulation and shifting value systems: Within whose hands should these objects belong? Whose responsibility or right is it to preserve memory? Who is equipped to care for the objects, and how might ‘care’ and ‘preservation’ be defined in this context?

Kate Morrell, 2021

[1] Les Field, *Dynamism Not Dualism: Money and Commodity, Archaeology and Guaquería, Gold and Wampum, Challenging the Dichotomy: The Licit and the Illicit in Archaeological and Heritage Discourses*. The University of Arizona Press, 2016.